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**“I Shop, Therefore I Am: Consumerism and the Mass Media in the Novels of
Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland”**

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Abstract:

This thesis argues that consumerism and the mass media wield an unparalleled influence over contemporary North American society, and that these forces constitute the primary means through which identity is constituted. The historical and theoretical developments that have led to the foregrounding of these forces are outlined in the introduction – developments, it is argued, that are intrinsically connected to the social upheaval that characterized America in the late 1960's and early 1970's; while their presence in and effects on the fiction of four contemporary North American writers - Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland - are examined in the main body of the thesis.

Chapter I focuses on Pynchon whose novels, it is argued, are the product of a uniquely post-1960's America, which mourns the sacrifice of traditional ideals to the corporate mindset which has been prevalent since the 1980's. Pynchon's dominant metaphor for the direction in which he believes American society to be moving is the thermodynamic concept of entropy, which stipulates that all progress is towards death. His novels abound with characters who disintegrate due to the information overload fostered by their media-based world. However, he retains his faith that a return to historical values and traditions will stem and even reverse the entropic tide.

DeLillo, a close contemporary of Pynchon's, draws on a different aspect of the legacy of the 1960's, for his writing is overshadowed by the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy and the years of turbulence that ensued. His novels are ultimately more pessimistic because his characters do not succeed in escaping from the repressive narratives of consumerism and the mass media in order to reassert their own personalities. One reason for this failure, it is argued, is that DeLillo's characters represent a metaphorical dramatization of the dichotomy between the modernist desire for structure and the postmodernist embrace of fluidity and uncertainty.

The fictional characters of the younger authors, Ellis and Coupland, inhabit this postmodern world, where all experience has been rendered depthless and traditional ontological and epistemological certainties have been collapsed. Ellis' characters fluctuate between the extremes of apathy and violence as they search for a way of preventing their psyches from disintegrating amidst the surrounding chaos. Neither one of these options brings any relief.

Coupland is more optimistic about the ability of his characters to survive and even prosper in the contemporary world. He arms them with the linguistic and technological skills necessary to adapt to the rapid social and technological changes. Most importantly of all, he draws on the sense of objectivity fostered by his own background as a Canadian in order to provide them with an alternative and a sense of escape from the media-saturated environment of the American West Coast.

What is perhaps most remarkable about these four authors as a group is that in spite of their obvious insight into the nature of the contemporary postmodern world, they are unwilling – or perhaps even unable – to fully relinquish their hold on a number of traditional metanarratives, most notably the ideal of the stable, supportive family unit. This implies a degree of uncertainty and perhaps even of fear on their parts about fully committing to the fluidity of contemporary culture.

Introduction.

‘Because you see the main thing today is – shopping. Years ago a person, he was unhappy, didn’t know what to do with himself – he’d go to church, start a revolution – *something*. Today you’re unhappy? Can’t figure it out? What is the salvation? Go Shopping’ - Arthur Miller, *The Price*.

Echoing the sentiments expressed above by Miller, this thesis will argue that the compulsion to consume is one of the dominant characteristics of American capitalist society¹, having infiltrated and ultimately overthrown traditional ideological structures such as history, religion and family. ‘I Shop, Therefore I Am’, the title of the thesis, points to a conviction expressed by many of the fictional characters I will be discussing below that it is principally through consumerism that they can express their identities in the turbulent world of the present. Closely connected to the force of consumerism is that of the mass media, which is also credited with usurping the structuring role played in the past by historical and religious ontologies and epistemologies. Mirroring the mantra of consumerism, the related phrase ‘Televiso ergo sum’ (I am televised, therefore I am²) is also applicable to many of the characters who look to the mass media for guidance and validation. The main focus of this thesis is thus on the forces of consumerism and the mass media and their effects on the characters portrayed in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland. I will begin in this introduction by outlining the historical and theoretical developments that have led to the foregrounding of these forces in contemporary society, before moving on, in the main body of the thesis, to exploring their presence in and effects on the novels in question.

One characteristic of what many observers have named the ‘consumer society’ is the large degree of emotional investment in the commodities themselves – the shopping mall, as Kowinski puts it, now represents: ‘The culmination of all the

¹ Although Douglas Coupland, one of the four authors who constitutes the focus of this thesis, is Canadian, his foregrounding of American society and culture in his novels justifies his inclusion in this examination of contemporary American phenomena.

² Hal Himmelstein, *Television Myth and The American Mind* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984), 281.

American dreams, both decent and demented; the fulfillment, the model of postwar paradise³. Admittedly this emphasis on consumerism is not a new development in American literature. As early as 1877, for example, Christopher Newman, hero of Henry James' *The American*, equates his idea of comfort with: 'Possessing a number of patented mechanical devices – half of which he should never have occasion to use'⁴; while novelists such as Nathanael West, John Dos Passos and Flannery O'Connor, writing in the 1930's and 1940's, testify to the growing strength of consumerism as the dominant American ethos. In *The Day of the Locust*, for example, Claude Estee claims that even emotions can be packaged and sold as commodities: 'Love is like a vending machine.... You insert a coin and press home the lever'⁵; while *Manhattan Transfer* concerns itself with: 'American individuals (who) are possessed by the economic machine of the city'⁶. O'Connor's observation, in *Wise Blood*, that people are increasingly classified by what they are wearing: '(She) squinted at the price tag. The shirt had cost him \$11.95. She felt that that placed him'⁷, directly foreshadows the end-of-century novels of Ellis and Coupland whose characters are almost exclusively defined by the designer labels they wear: 'Evelyn's wearing a cotton blouse by Dolce and Gabbana, suede shoes by Yves St. Laurent, a stenciled calf skirt by Adrienne Landau with a suede belt by Jill Stuart'⁸; and the beauty products they apply: 'Which shampoo will I use today? Maybe PsychoPath, the sports shampoo with salon-grade microprotein....Afterward? A bracing energizer splash of Monk-On-Fire'⁹. As this evidence suggests, consumerism has had a long history of engagement with American society - and, by extension, its literature. Most notable is the considerable and consistent power it continues to wield over its subjects.

³ Quoted in George Ritzer. *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (California: Pine Forge Press, 1996), 29.

⁴ Henry James. *The American* (US: Everyman Paperbacks, 1977), 86.

⁵ Nathanael West. *The Day of the Locust* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1962), 72.

⁶ Jay McInerney's Introduction to John Dos Passos. *Manhattan Transfer* (UK: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987), 7.

⁷ Flannery O'Connor. *Wise Blood* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1985), 4.

⁸ Bret Easton Ellis. *American Psycho* (GB: Picador, 1991), 143.

⁹ Douglas Coupland. *Shampoo Planet* (GB: Simon and Schuster Ltd., 1993), 7.

In spite of this thematic consistency, however, I believe that the fiction written from the mid-1960's onwards constitutes a radical break with what went before. One of the defining characteristics of the more recent fiction is the tendency for the commodity to be subordinated to its image. This progression is emphasized by Baudrillard, who abandoned his original project of extending 'the Marxist critique of capitalism to areas beyond the scope of the mode of production'¹⁰ when he realized that Marx's analysis of commodity production was hopelessly outdated. The reason for this was that capitalism was now predominantly concerned with the production of signs, images and sign systems, rather than with the commodities themselves. While not all theorists agree with Baudrillard's rejection of Marxism – Jameson, for example, regards the contemporary situation as the latest development within capitalism rather than as a radical break from it¹¹ – his equation of the modern world with a giant simulacrum composed of self-referential signs which are not tied to any specific meanings¹² has received widespread support from theorists such as Eagleton, who points to its: 'Depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive....'¹³ nature. One obvious example of this liberation of signs, as Webster points out, is that different aspects of culture – styles of clothing, for example – no longer refer to specific historical eras as they did in the past, but that people now: 'Playfully mix images to present no distinct meaning, but instead to derive 'pleasure' in the parody or pastiche of, say, combining punk and a 1950's Marilyn Monroe facial'¹⁴. The neat categories into which the clothes worn by O'Connor's characters immediately place them are thus imploded in the contemporary sign-filled world of what Baudrillard calls the 'hyperreal'¹⁵.

Given that commodities are being subsumed by their images to such a degree that the label 'consumer society' is often substituted by the more appropriate 'society of

¹⁰ Mark Poster's Introduction to Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 1.

¹¹ Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July/August 1984), 55.

¹² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.

¹³ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (US: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1996), vii.

¹⁴ Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 23.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), 11.

the spectacle'¹⁶, it is no surprise that the mass media, television in particular, have been hailed as the new main site of the production not only of the images eagerly demanded by hungry viewers but of the 'reality' and meaning of life itself. The effectiveness of television's persuasiveness is emphasized by Mayer who hails it as: 'Undoubtedly the greatest selling medium in the world'¹⁷. One phenomenon noted by many theorists is the increasing tendency among consumers to purchase a commodity not for its intrinsic qualities but rather in order to identify themselves with the mythology created around the product by its advertizement. As Kellner points out: 'Television ads are more symbolic and rhetorical than informative....(O)ne is clearly purchasing symbolic, indeed imaginary, values when one buys products advertized on television'¹⁸. This and other issues relating to the emergence of consumerism and the mass media as prominent forces in contemporary North America will be examined later in this introductory chapter. First, however, I believe it is important to provide both an historical and a theoretical outline for the developments that have resulted in society being so vulnerable to, and ultimately dependent on, their presence.

Given that the next section of this chapter will examine the emergence of postmodernism as the dominant theoretical discourse at the end of the twentieth-century, it may seem ironic – even contradictory – that I propose to begin with an examination of the historical developments which, it is argued, have shaped the contemporary world. History, after all, is rejected as a construction by many of the leading proponents of postmodernism¹⁹. Because I am convinced that some of the events of American postwar history cast a crucial light on the contemporary phenomena that will be discussed below, I am inclined to moderate this rejection of history along the lines of Bradbury and Ro's statement that: 'An awareness of fictionality does not necessarily deny history its weight; it merely refuses its manipulative effect as

¹⁶ See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983) (orig. pub. 1967).

¹⁷ Quoted in Philip Drummond and Richard Paterson, eds., *Television in Transition* (London: British Film Institute, 1985), 38.

¹⁸ Douglas Kellner, "Critical Theory, Commodities and the Consumer Society", *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1983), 75.

¹⁹ Baudrillard, for example, declares that: 'History itself has always, deep down, been an immense simulation model', *The Illusion of the End* (UK: Polity Press, 1994), 7.

system'²⁰. While realizing that history cannot provide all the answers, therefore, the next section of this introduction will provide a brief overview of the seminal events from which much of the present malaise appears to stem.

The paradox that defines America at the end of the twentieth-century is that although surrounded by visible manifestations of success – by 1999, America's rate of economic growth made it the best performing of the G7 rich industrial nations: 'Hollywood and Silicon Valley rule supreme'²¹ – one widespread mood seems to be that of despair. This was illustrated in President Clinton's 1997 inauguration speech which, as Esler remarks, was characterized by: 'Anger, anxiety and apathy...three symptoms of the American disease of disconnection in the dying years of the twentieth-century'²². These symptoms are also frequently expressed by the characters in Ellis' and Coupland's novels who complain that: 'There's not a whole lot to do anymore'²³; and furthermore that: 'We're all working. We all have jobs but...there's something missing'²⁴. So widespread is this mood that the period has been dubbed 'the Age of Anxiety' by many observers, including Huxley²⁵ and McLuhan²⁶. This anxiety is generally thought to stem from the turbulent societal changes forged by the many crises that occurred during the 1960's. One reason the events that unfolded during the 1960's shocked the American public so badly was that they came after a period of unprecedented growth and complacency that had been enjoyed since the end of World War II. Under the leadership of Dwight D. Eisenhower, one of the military heroes of the war, America had settled back in the 1950's to enjoy its role as the superpower with an optimism most clearly expressed in the baby boom that ensued. The post-war boom meant that the average American's personal income rose by 293% between 1940 and

²⁰ Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro. eds., *Contemporary American Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1987), 43.

²¹ Larry Elliott, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Back to California Dreaming", *The Guardian* (Tuesday, 29 June, 1999), 22.

²² Gavin Esler, *The United States of Anger: The People and the American Dream* (New York and London: Penguin Group, 1997), 8.

²³ Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (GB: Picador, 1986), 126.

²⁴ Douglas Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma* (London: Flamingo, 1998), 78.

²⁵ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 119.

²⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994), 5.

1955, with the result that by 1954, America, with only 6% of the world's population, owned 60% of the world's cars, 58% of the telephones and 45% of the radios²⁷. These years also witnessed the explosive growth of television as a social force, for although public television services began in the US in 1939, it is 1954 – the first year that over half of the country's households owned television sets – that is generally pinpointed as constituting the start of the media-dominated society²⁸.

The 1950's also heralded the emergence of many other key elements of modern American postwar culture: the first McDonalds was opened in 1955, the same year as Disneyland, while the first fully enclosed mall followed a year later²⁹. Under this veneer of prosperity, however, many Americans lived in a state of constant anxiety, partly attributable to mounting pressure from communist forces with which they were engaged both in the Cold War and in Korea. As a journalist of the time observed, Americans were: 'Confident to the verge of complacency about the perfectibility of American society, anxious to the point of paranoia about the threat of communism'³⁰. In spite of these worries, however, the 1950's remain for many the focus of nostalgia for values such as stable community and family bonds that appear to be missing today. Jameson describes the era as representing: 'The privileged lost object of desire – not merely the stability and prosperity of a pax Americana, but also the first naïve innocence of the counter-cultural impulses of early rock-and-roll and youth gangs' ("Postmodernism", 67). DeLillo's huge end-of-century retrospective *Underworld*³¹ represents precisely such an attempt to revisit the more innocent days of the 1950's, a period before: 'Paranoia replaced history in American life'³² and the post-war unity and optimism was lost forever. An understanding of the changes that occurred during the 1950's is thus a

²⁷ Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 139.

²⁸ Leo Bogart. Quoted in Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 127.

²⁹ George Ritzer, *Expressing America: A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society* (California: Pine Forge Press, 1995), 31.

³⁰ Godfrey Hodgson. Quoted in Mary Beth Norton et al. *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 869.

³¹ Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (GB: Picador, 1998) (orig. pub. 1997).

³² Fintan O'Toole Interview with Don DeLillo, "And Quiet Writes the Don", *The Irish Times* (Saturday, 10 January, 1998), 5.

useful starting-point for an examination of contemporary society, for this decade not only saw the emergence of a culture dominated by consumerism and the mass media, but also represents for Americans the bastion of many lost values and traditions.

The 1960's are generally regarded as constituting *the* turning-point in recent American history, representing a radical break between the relatively straight-forward life that preceded them and the widespread turbulence and chaos which many believe define the closing decades of the twentieth-century. Nothing, according to Bradbury, marked the turn from the 'tranquilized' 1950's more clearly than the election, in 1960, of John F. Kennedy to the Presidency³³. The new President's eloquence mirrored an optimism among many young Americans that the time had come for the old order to give way to a more liberal mode of government. Indeed one of the lasting legacies of the early 1960's was this idea that one could go out and challenge the powers that be – a mentality that never existed among the Cold War generation. Counter-cultural and anti-war groups began to emerge in the various universities, and the Civil Rights movement began to hope that equality would soon spread to all sectors of society. This dream even appeared to be on the verge of fulfillment when, having witnessed the President's support for James Meredith, the first African-American student to attend the University of Mississippi in 1962, more than two-hundred-and-fifty thousand people gathered to hear Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech in June 1963³⁴. This optimism was short-lived, however. There is no doubt that the assassination of President Kennedy, on 22 November 1963, is one of the seminal events of twentieth-century American history. One contemporary journalist wrote that for many people the assassination represented a turning point: 'The end of a time of hope, the beginning of a time of troubles'³⁵. In *Libra*, DeLillo, who often writes about the effect the assassination had on him personally, describes it as: 'The seven seconds that broke the back of the American century'³⁶, further explaining its legacy in an interview: 'I think we've all come to feel

³³ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 156.

³⁴ Norton et al. 991. Race was not the only issue being addressed at this time, for women's rights groups were equally militant and active.

³⁵ Godfrey Hodgson. Quoted in Norton et al. 989.

³⁶ Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1991), 181.

that what's been missing over these past twenty-five years is the sense of a manageable reality. Much of that feeling can be traced to that one moment in Dallas. We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then'³⁷. In similar terms, Engelhardt expresses the sense of an ending that permeated the days surrounding Kennedy's death: 'In its senselessness, that assassination had cut short narrative possibilities...as if "The End" had quite unexpectedly appeared on every screen in the country'³⁸. Its deep roots within the American psyche are apparent in the almost unilateral recollection of the day's events.

Tragic though the death of the President was, however, it is important to remember that his was only one of a number of violent murders that took place over the next few years, as sections of the Civil Rights movement veered out of control. An early victim was Malcolm X, chief spokesman for the Black Muslims, who was assassinated in 1965 by some of his own followers who were angry at the apparent softening of his hostility towards the white race. 1964 was the first of the 'long hot summers' of race riots that erupted in various cities across the country, including the Los Angeles ghetto of Watts (in which thirty-four people were killed in August 1965), and in Newark and Detroit (in which twenty-six and forty-three people respectively lost their lives following street battles between African-Americans and the security forces during a particularly violent week in July 1967)³⁹. The civil unrest reached its boiling point in 1968, a year that for many historians represents the 'pivotal dividing-line of postwar years'⁴⁰. Two prominent and popular leaders were murdered: In April, Martin Luther King's assassination led to rioting in one-hundred-and-sixty-eight cities and towns; two months later, Robert Kennedy, younger brother of the President, was also shot dead⁴¹. American internal affairs had thus reached crisis proportions by the end of the decade.

³⁷ Anthony DeCurtis interview with DeLillo. From Frank Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 48.

³⁸ Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (US: Basic Books, 1995), 182.

³⁹ Norton et al. 1000-1.

⁴⁰ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), viii.

⁴¹ Norton et al. 1006-7.

1968 was also the year in which America's position as a world power was seriously challenged and undermined. The first shock was the capture of the USS Pueblo, a navy intelligence ship, by the North Koreans in January, and the remanding of her crew of eighty-two until the following December⁴². Almost simultaneously came what was to be known as the 'Tet Offensive' in Vietnam, when Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops surprised the American army by sweeping across South Vietnam during Tet, the Vietnamese holiday of the lunar new year, capturing many provincial capitals⁴³. Although the Americans subsequently retook much of what was gained, the incident hinted for first time that victory was not guaranteed. Meanwhile American casualties were climbing – figures revealed that more American soldiers had been killed in the first six months of 1968 than in all of 1967: by July 1968, total American fatalities had surpassed thirty thousand. When CBS anchorman, Walter Cronkite, formerly a supporter of the war, returned from a trip to Vietnam and announced on air that the war was 'mired in stalemate', President Johnson knew the time had come to pull out his troops, an operation that began in March of that year⁴⁴. The psychological effects of this defeat were both profound and long lasting. By the early 1990's, some sixty thousand war veterans had committed suicide (more than the fifty-eight thousand who lost their lives during the war itself!), while countless others exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder⁴⁵. The slow psychological recovery is also revealed in President Bush's declaration that the 1991 victory over Iraq was a chance for Americans to finally put the past behind them: 'By God....we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome for once and for all'⁴⁶. Whether the mounting pressure from both internal and external forces could really have changed the fabric of American life will never be known, for just as the civil unrest reached its crest the American people, sickened and terrified by the violence and brutal assassinations, elected the Republican, Richard

⁴² Ibid. 1006.

⁴³ Ibid. 969.

⁴⁴ Engelhardt. 243.

⁴⁵ Norton et al. 973-4.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Norton et al. 1068.

Nixon, to be their President, a move that heralded the return of the old political, social and cultural conservatism that many historians believe remains dominant even today.

The representation of 1968 as the point of division between two very different American societies – one characterized by hope and self-belief, the other by despair and apathy – remains a dominant motif in the imaginations of many Americans. It is dramatized in the figure of Bucky Wunderlick, the protagonist of DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*⁴⁷, who is described as standing at the crossroads between murder and suicide – a metaphor, according to DeCurtis, for the movement of American society from the political upheavals and turmoil of the late 1960's to the dreadful cynicism, deep alienation, and desperate privatism of the 1970's⁴⁸. Certainly there were concrete reasons for the pessimism expressed during this period. Economically, the country was hit by a worldwide recession, the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930's: 'Inflation reached unprecedented heights, unemployment swelled, productivity declined and the economy entered a period of stagnation'⁴⁹. Tough though this economic reality might have been, historians generally agree that the deepest scars were psychological, for the recession clearly heralded the end of the abundance and optimism that had characterized American society since the end of World War II. The prevalent feeling – and one that, according to Hobsbawm, still lingers today – was that society no longer knew which direction to go: 'The history of the twenty years after 1973 is that of a world which lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis'⁵⁰. The forced resignation of President Nixon in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal in 1974 was for many the last straw: 'Battered by over a decade of turmoil, many Americans ceased to believe in any version of the American dream'⁵¹. Bearing in mind that many of the characters who populate the novels of Ellis and Coupland – as well, of course, as the

⁴⁷ Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street* (New York and London: The Penguin Group, 1994) (orig. pub. 1973).

⁴⁸ Anthony DeCurtis, "The Product: Bucky Wunderlick, Rock 'n Roll, and Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 89, no.2 (Spring 1990), 371.

⁴⁹ Chafe, 431.

⁵⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Penguin Group, 1994), 403.

⁵¹ Norton et al, 988.

two authors themselves – were just about old enough to remember these events, the apathy and disinterest they display towards mainstream life is hardly surprising.

After the scandal surrounding Nixon's resignation and his succession by two generally colourless and ineffectual Presidents, Ford and Carter, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981 constituted, as one of his advisers observed, 'A yearning for leadership....(for) an authority figure....who can take charge, return a sense of discipline to our government, and manifest the will-power needed to get this country back on track'⁵². Reagan enjoyed the most auspicious start possible to his Presidency when his inauguration was shortly followed by the release of fifty-two American hostages who had been held in Tehran for over a year⁵³. A very visible manifestation of the nation's sense of impotence and frustration was thus abolished. Reagan also managed to stem and eventually turn the tide of the recession that held America in its grip at the time: although unemployment peaked at 10% in 1982, it had dropped to 7.1% by 1984⁵⁴. More importantly still, by making a clear stand against the Russians, not only with strong words but also with a large military build-up, Reagan re-instilled in Americans a pride that had been lacking in recent years. His stand against abortion and belief that America should return to traditional pre-1960's values, such as family and organized religion, also received widespread support.

There was undoubtedly much to criticize about Reagan's presidency even before he became implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal. Society was becoming increasingly polarized due to his economic reforms, while escalating social problems among the poorer and more marginalized sectors of the community (the AIDS virus first appeared in the US in 1981) were being ignored in favour of a rise in military spending (for his Strategic Defense Initiative, for example). Even cynics could not deny his popularity, however. The dissident writer, Hunter S. Thompson, is among those who were forced to admit that Reagan was astounding even his most determined critics: 'We have all come to live with the fact that Ronald Reagan is more popular now than John Wayne ever

⁵² Quoted in Chafe, 469.

⁵³ Norton et al. 1023.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 1025.

dreamed of being'⁵⁵. The work ethic encouraged by Reagan as a means for Americans to move forward from recent hardships is credited with fostering the greed and materialism that are often cited as the defining characteristics of the 1980's. Thompson was among those who expressed disgust at what they saw around them: 'Huge brains, small necks, weak pulses and fat wallets – these are the dominant physical characteristics of the '80's....The Generation of Swine'⁵⁶. The extent of the moral degradation that went hand-in-hand with such a whole-hearted focus on the accumulation of wealth and consumer goods is the subject of novels such as Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*⁵⁷ and Ellis' *American Psycho*, which I will be discussing in a later chapter. The reality, however, is that the majority of Americans were enjoying the fruits of their labours, as demonstrated in ever-increasing sales of a vast range of new electronic goods⁵⁸. What is interesting about many of Reagan's supporters – bearing in mind that in his re-election of 1984, he captured all but the home-state of his opponent, Walter Mondale⁵⁹ – is that many of them must have been converts from the countercultural movements of the late 1960's and early 1970's. This sacrifice of ideology in favour of the material rewards offered by Reagan's economic policies is but one of the themes addressed by Pynchon in *Vineland*: 'First thing all new hires found out was that their hair kept getting in the way of work. Some cut it short, some tied it back....Their once ethereal girlfriends were busing dishes or cocktail-waitressing'⁶⁰. The reason so many ex-hippies entered into mainstream life can perhaps be attributed to the soul-destroying cynicism that stemmed from the many crises discussed above. The extent to which some former protestors embraced official politics, incidentally, reaches its nexus with the 1992 election of Bill Clinton, the first baby-boomer to be nominated by a major party, who had opposed the Vietnam War during his student days in the

⁵⁵ Hunter S. Thompson, *Generation of Swine: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the '80's* (London: Picador, 1988), 141.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 27.

⁵⁷ Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (London: Picador, 1990) (orig. pub. 1987).

⁵⁸ Sales of personal computers rose from two million in 1980 to forty-five million in 1988; while the number of videos being rented increased from twenty-six million in 1980 to three-hundred-and-four million in 1984. Norton et al. 1053.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 1039.

⁶⁰ Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1991), 321.

1960's and even pulled strings to avoid being drafted⁶¹. This is but one piece of irrefutable evidence that the Civil Rights and countercultural movements, which inspired such optimism at the start of the 1960's, were well and truly assimilated into the mainstream by the 1990's.

If the ex-hippies of the baby boomer generation achieved some measure of comfort by surrounding themselves with visible reminders of their success in the shape of designer clothes and the most up-to-date technical equipment, their children – variously denoted the Baby Busters, the Lost Generation or Generation X⁶² – hold the dubious honour of being the first generation in American history who cannot expect to do better than their parents: a presumption, according to Esler, that had once amounted to a kind of Creed among the middle classes (9). Advances in technology and an increasingly less stable economy meant the end of the 'job-for-life' that had been the preserve of their ancestors. It is telling that the largest private employer in the US at the beginning of the 1990's was not General Motors but Manpower Inc. – a temporary agency. The fact that two-thirds of the new jobs created in 1992 were temporary, and thus without pension rights or job security⁶³, is certainly one reason for the aimless drifting and lack of direction displayed by many of the young characters who will be examined later on. The point is that this generation, which constitutes the main focus of this thesis, is a product of the many historical episodes examined above. Their obsession with commodities and the messages of the mass media has its roots not only in the post-war boom of the Eisenhower years, during which consumerism and the mass media emerged onto the scene as dominant social forces, but also of the materialist Reagan years, when many of their parents surrounded themselves with their possessions in a bid to insulate themselves from the horrors of the recent past. This use of commodities as a source of security is demonstrated both by Mucho Maas, in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*: 'She suspected the disc jockey spot....was a way of letting the Top 200, and even the news copy that came jabbering out of the machine....be a buffer

⁶¹ Norton et al. 1074.

⁶² Bret Easton Ellis. "The Twentysomethings: Adrift in a Pop Landscape". *The New York Times* (Sunday, 2 December, 1990), H1, H37.

⁶³ Douglas Rushkoff, ed., *The GenX Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 78.

between him and that lot'⁶⁴; and by the Gladney parents, in DeLillo's *White Noise*, who describe the sense of satisfaction they derive from shopping: 'It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases....in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls'⁶⁵. Given that many of the new developments in technology and science have changed the nature of the world so radically – the concepts of time and space have arguably been undermined by inventions such as the Internet – many of the younger generation are suffused by an anxious awareness that the world is uncharted territory through which they must journey with little or no historical precedent to guide them.

The apathy and refusal to participate in mainstream society expressed by many young characters can also be attributed to some of the political developments they would have witnessed when they were children. Some of the students in Ellis' *The Rules of Attraction* claim to have been as adversely affected by the assassination of President Kennedy as any of the older generation who were actually alive when it happened: 'John F. Kennedy did it....our mothers were pregnant with us when we...I mean, he....was blown away in '64 and that whole incident....screwedthingsup'⁶⁶. The lack of regard for historical accuracy here is in sharp contrast to the photographic memories of many of those who 'witnessed' the assassination. Perhaps more persuasive is Rushkoff's argument that because the first President that his generation remembered was Nixon, who was forced to resign in disgrace - in sharp contrast to Eisenhower, the venerated military hero – it is impossible for them to regard authority figures as valid or even as constituting anything they need to rebel against⁶⁷. Generally they simply ignore them, or like Ellis' students undermine their importance by disregarding historical accuracy. It is an understanding of this attitude, fostered by many turbulent decades of American history, which resolves the paradox with which I began this section of the

⁶⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (GB: Picador, 1979), 9.

⁶⁵ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986), 20.

⁶⁶ Bret Easton Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (GB: Picador, 1988), 30.

⁶⁷ Douglas Rushkoff in an interview with Michael Okwu, "Generation X Commentator", *Cable News Network Financial* (Monday, 22 September, 1997). http://www.rushkoff.com/only_money.html

introduction. Clearly the reason that so many Americans experience the ‘anger, anxiety and apathy’ that characterizes the dying years of the twentieth-century is quite simply that having witnessed the destruction of so many facets of the traditional American dream – Presidents have been disgraced, progress through hard work is no longer guaranteed, and ideology has been sacrificed to the forces of consumerism and the mass media – many young Americans have lost their way and are floundering. The frequency with which this sense of aimlessness and disappointment at the way in which life has unfolded is depicted in the literature of the period – in *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992), for example, Updike’s narrator complains: ‘We had worn love beads and smoked dope, we had danced nude and shat on the flag, we had bombed Hanoi and landed on the moon, and still the sky remained unimpressed’⁶⁸ – further testifies to its prevalence.

An important point to remember in relation to these recent historical events is that they encompass a great number of radical social and cultural changes that came to pass over a very short period of time. Within four decades, many of the institutions on which society had grown dependent – family, organized religion, and so on – appear to have crumbled or at least suffered a major setback; while advances in technology have greatly multiplied the ideas and images we are supposed to assimilate. One statistic indicates that in only one hour’s television viewing, one is likely to experience more images than a member of a non-industrial society would do in a lifetime⁶⁹. The resulting sense of confusion is thus a natural result, according to Rushkoff, of the fact that without having migrated an inch, we have nonetheless traveled further than any generation in history⁷⁰. When people face what nothing in their past has prepared them for, a natural reaction, as Hobsbawm explains, is to grope for words to name the unknown, even when they can neither define nor understand it. The keyword ‘post’ is commonly used to mark out the mental territory of twentieth-century life⁷¹, its many

⁶⁸ John Updike, *Memories of the Ford Administration* (New York and London: The Penguin Group, 1993), 247.

⁶⁹ John Fiske. Quoted in Webster, 177.

⁷⁰ Douglas Rushkoff, *Children of Chaos* (London: Flamingo, 1997), 3.

⁷¹ Hobsbawm, 287.

variations including ‘post-industrialism’⁷²; ‘post-fordism’⁷³; and even ‘post-historic’⁷⁴. Although each of these terms – and many more like them – refer to the same growth of industrial and technological forces operating to shape and mould contemporary society, it is yet another term, ‘postmodernism’, that has captured the intellectual imagination and is most widely used to denote a number of phenomena generally hailed as characterizing the contemporary world. Before discussing its most important aspects as they apply to both sociological and aesthetic life, I will look briefly at the historical and social conditions out of which postmodernism emerged.

The term ‘postmodernism’ was probably first used in 1939 by Arnold Toynbee who suggests, in *A Study of History*, that the modern period came to an end during World War I and that postmodernism began to articulate and shape itself in the inter-war years⁷⁵. The term, characterized from its inception by ambiguity, hovered around the edges of sociological arguments and ‘end of ideology’ debates in the 1950’s until it was centralized by theorists who wanted to articulate the prevalent mood of dissatisfaction. One symptom of this mood, according to Jameson, was a widespread ‘inverted millenarianism’, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by the sense of an end of various things – the end of history, ideology, culture, and so on – all of which constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism (“Postmodernism”, 53). Postmodern theory is based on the hypothesis that there was a radical break in society, generally thought to have occurred in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. Jameson sites the economic preparation for postmodernism, or ‘late capitalism’ as he also calls it, in the 1950’s when the end of the wartime shortages of consumer goods meant that new products and technologies could be pioneered⁷⁶. More important than this, however, was the psychic break that many theorists associate

⁷² Daniel Bell. *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1974), 112.

⁷³ Edward W. Soja. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York and London: Verso, 1989), 61-2.

⁷⁴ Herminio Martins. “Technology, Modernity, Politics”. From James Good and Irving Velody, eds., *The Politics of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155.

⁷⁵ Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (GB: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 1-2.

⁷⁶ Frederic Jameson. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York and London: Verso, 1991), xx.

with the 1960's. One common opinion is that postmodernism began as a reaction against the institutionalization of modernism in universities, museums and concert halls. This entrenchment, according to Jameson, was felt to be oppressive by the generation that came of age in the 1960's and tried to create some breathing space for itself by repudiating modernist values⁷⁷. Latimer similarly attributes this repudiation of authority to: 'A collective mid-life crisis of the Vietnam War generation of graduate students permanently traumatized by mendacious authority figures and their death dealing abstractions'⁷⁸. The need for a new system of values came to a head during the tumultuous year of 1968. I have already discussed 1968 as a seminal year in terms of the history of the United States. The year was also one of social unrest in Europe, particularly in France, where it witnessed a series of student revolutions that were to have long-lasting effects. Lyotard was himself involved in a protest at Nanterre University that began on the twenty-second of March 1968 in protest against a proposed reduction in university places. Another focus of the protest was the affirmation of the rights of students to openly express their political views⁷⁹. What was most remarkable about the events of 1968, according to Lyotard, was the anger displayed by the students who regarded themselves not as free but as subject to the repressive strictures of a pervasive bureaucracy⁸⁰. Technically, students and intellectuals failed to lead a political revolution in 1968. Having expressed their anger, however, they were unable to return to how they were and began to look for alternatives. One solution that quickly gained momentum was the abandonment of modernity and all of its repressive structures. I will discuss the dismantling of metanarratives and the collapsing of hierarchies and other traditional differentiations associated with modernism later. First, however, I want to mention briefly some of the other emerging phenomena that influenced the rise of postmodernism.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Anders Stephanson, "Regarding Postmodernism – A Conversation with Frederic Jameson". From Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), 3-4.

⁷⁸ Dan Latimer, "Jameson and Postmodernism". *New Left Review*, no. 148 (Nov./Dec. 1984), 116.

⁷⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Political Writings* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 41.

⁸⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 195-6.

Despite its connection to the student rebellions in Europe, postmodernism is generally regarded as a predominantly American phenomenon. Bertens claims that historically postmodernism was being discussed in America long before anywhere else in the Western World: 'Postmodernism was for a long time an exclusively American affair'⁸¹. Hall even ventures that the eventual popularity of the concept of postmodernism in other countries was a symptom of the general 'Americanization' of the developed world: '(Postmodernism is) about how the world dreams itself to be American'⁸². Certainly America is usually hailed as the bastion of postmodernist values. Baudrillard, for example, describes the country as: 'The lyrical nature of pure circulation.... A giant hologram.... Utopia achieved'⁸³. One interesting fact about postmodernism in America is that it can be closely tied to some of the other social developments detailed in my discussion about American history, most significantly to the rise of consumerism and the mass media as dominant forces. As was mentioned above, Jameson is adamant that postmodernism can best be explained as a development within the later stages of capitalism and that its roots can be traced back to the consumer society of the 1950's. He even goes so far as to claim that it is their respective positions within capitalism that constitutes the fundamental differences between modernism and postmodernism: 'Even if all the constitutive features of postmodernism were identical and continuous with those of an older modernism...the two phenomena would still remain utterly distinct in their meaning and social function, owing to the very different positioning of postmodernism in the economic system of late capital' ('Postmodernism', 55). Jameson is not alone in his connection of capitalism and postmodernism. Springer also associates postmodernism with the rise of multinational corporations who began to control the world's economic and cultural systems after the war, with the result that the driving force behind social organization became the perpetual consumption of goods⁸⁴. Brooker agrees that postmodernism has come to be

⁸¹ Hans Bertens, "Postmodern Culture(s)". From Edmund J. Smyth, ed., *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1991), 123.

⁸² Quoted in Ross, ed., xii.

⁸³ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 27, 29, 77.

⁸⁴ Claudia Springer, *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age* (Austin: The University of Texas, 1996), 39-40.

identified with the postwar period of late capitalism, although he places his emphasis on the repressive nature of the expanding state and business bureaucracies, and their effects on the individual psyche: 'Allied to changes in the modes and periods of employment, patterns of consumption, the use and effects of global information and media networks, this new phase of technological and capitalist development has induced a crisis of representation and subjectivity'⁸⁵. Apathy and paranoia are but two manifestations of this crisis – symptoms clearly demonstrated by many of the fictional characters who will be discussed below.

Like every other contemporary social phenomenon, postmodernism also has close links to the emergence of the mass media – television in particular – as a dominant force. The endless stream of images with which television bombards the world is arguably the main cause of the implosion of distinctions between categories such as reality and representation, high and low culture, and so on, which is generally regarded as a defining characteristic of postmodernism. As Brooker observes: 'Postmodern communication technologies, principally television...flood the world with self-generating, self-mirroring images', thus rendering all experience 'thoroughly eclectic and superficial'⁸⁶. Baudrillard, the theorist most associated with this particular area of postmodernism, draws on McLuhan's theories of the 'implosion of the social' to describe the end of information and meaning in a world so swamped with sounds and images: 'We live in a world in which there is more and more information, and less and less meaning' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 6). Information is of central importance to postmodernism and is even described by one critic as: 'The key to contemporary living'⁸⁷. Its link with television is obvious, for new developments in that medium have made information now instantly available all over the globe, its exchange no longer restricted by traditional obstacles such as time and space. This has had many interesting side-effects, including the replacement of historical narrative with multiple

⁸⁵ Peter Brooker, *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, and the New Modern* (New York and London: Longman Group Ltd., 1996), 65.

⁸⁶ Peter Brooker, *Modernism Postmodernism* (GB: Longman Group Ltd., 1992), 151.

⁸⁷ Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context* (UK: Polity Press, 1990), 7.

interpretations, the subordination of the real by its image or representation, and the obliteration of the traditional boundaries between cultural categories, all of which I will discuss in more detail below.

One final point worth making about this relationship between postmodernism and these forces of consumerism and the mass media is that instead of dismantling the controlling structures, as its origins in the student rebellions of 1968 would seem to require, postmodernism is regarded by many theorists as working with, rather than against, the energies of late capitalism. Connor points out that postmodernism is, in fact, a helpful ideology for a consumer society captive to the floating sensations offered by the postmodern media of television and advertizing. Moreover, the postmodernist attack on traditional structures such as family values and organized religion actually helps to undermine the few surviving sources of resistance to the complete domination of media and market⁸⁸. Connor may be guilty of overstating the case here for, regardless of the much-hyped attack on such structures, it is by no means clear that their dismantling has been affected, a point I will be returning to later. However, the fact remains that postmodernism certainly poses no challenge to the supremacy of capitalism. Some theorists even claim that postmodernism has fallen victim to its own fragmented and superficial nature and has itself been ‘consumed’ by capitalism: ‘Theory itself is “postmodernized”, adapting to the speed, fashions, superficial and fragmentary nature of the contemporary era....Theory thus becomes a hypercommodity, geared to sell and promote the latest fashions in thought and attitude’⁸⁹. The casual way in which the theory is discussed by some of Coupland’s young characters – Susan, for example, echoes Baudrillard’s simulacrum when she declares that the world is comprised of innumerable random images: ‘There’s no subconscious underneath to generate the images’⁹⁰ - is certainly one indication that ‘postmodernism’ has entered the popular vocabulary like many other fleetingly fashionable ‘in-’ words and phrases.

⁸⁸ Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 45-6.

⁸⁹ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1991), 140.

⁹⁰ Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (London: Flamingo, 1996), 44.

In *Microserfs*, Douglas Coupland offers a useful metaphor for the ‘notoriously slippery concept’⁹¹ of postmodernism: ‘Do you know that if you feed catfish...nothing but left-over grain mash they end up becoming white meat filet units with no discernible flavours (marine or otherwise) of their own? Thus they become whatever coating you apply to them....They’re the most postmodern creatures (sic) in the world’ (128). Coupland’s image points to an aspect of postmodernism that troubles many observers – namely that each theorist of the postmodern tends to bring his/her political affiliations and historical agendas to bear on their theorizing, with the result that we are left with a number of inconsistencies and contradictions. To give but one example, Jameson’s (a Marxist) belief that postmodernism represents an advanced development within capitalism (“Postmodernism”, 55), is not consistent with Lyotard’s claim that postmodernism heralds the demise of metanarratives such as capitalism⁹²; nor with Baudrillard’s insistence that we have left such structures behind us and have entered a realm of post-history or hyperreality (*The Illusion of the End*, 6). The ambivalence that characterizes the term ‘postmodernism’ is, of course, part of its appeal for some critics. Mepham, for example, celebrates its release from the structures of narrow, imposed meaning which leaves it free ‘to enjoy itself, to have fun’⁹³; while Grossberg insists that its ‘beguiling nature’ stems from the fact that it is: ‘Such a “readerly term”’; it leaves so much to the imagination’⁹⁴. As this thesis intends to use postmodern theory as a tool for better understanding the world in which the fictional characters of four specific authors are set, however, some sort of working definition of its main characteristics is needed. It is generally accepted that, by the 1980’s, postmodernism has come to be used in three broad senses: as a term to designate the cultural epoch through which we are living – an epoch viewed in predominantly apocalyptic terms; as an aesthetic practice; and as a development in thought which represents a critique of many modernist or Enlightenment discourses⁹⁵. The next section of this chapter will examine the main

⁹¹ Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (New York and London: Longman Group Ltd., 1992), 98.

⁹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (UK: Manchester University Press, 1987), xxiv.

⁹³ John Mepham, “Narratives of Postmodernism”. From Smyth, ed., 142.

⁹⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, “Putting the Pop Back into Postmodernism”. From Ross, ed., 67.

⁹⁵ Patricia Waugh, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (GB: Edward Arnold, 1992), 3.

components of postmodern theory, relating them both to social changes and to aesthetic practices.

Lyotard, as I explained above, defines postmodernism as constituting the abandonment of the grand narratives with which all life was legitimated in the past. He attributes this decline to postwar technological developments that undermined and overturned many traditional certainties⁹⁶. The freedom afforded by the abolition of such totalizing structures should, one would think, be welcome. In fact the opposite is true, for, as psychologist Erich Fromm explains, as well as making us independent, freedom from traditional structures has isolated us, thus making us anxious and powerless⁹⁷. This paradox is the subject of many contemporary novels. Pynchon's characters, for example, often appear to be trying to escape from various generally malevolent and omniscient forces, only to reveal that their real nightmare would be to find themselves ignored and abandoned by those very forces. In *The Crying of Lot 49* (first published in 1966), Oedipa Maas, although tormented by her bombardment with clues to a possible conspiracy, is much more disturbed when no such clues materialize: 'She could not say why exactly, but felt threatened by this absence of even the marginal try at communication latrines are known for' (47). Her sentiments are echoed by Tyrone Slothrop, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, who also expresses his preference for a life controlled by external forces: 'Either They have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather *have* the reason'⁹⁸. In spite of their torment at the hands of their oppressors, therefore, Pynchon's characters confirm Fromm's theory that a life of independence from such controls is more frightening than the actuality of manipulation. In order to ascertain the general reaction to this postmodernist dismantling of many traditional metanarratives, I will now look at three of the most important structures – history, religion and family – investigating whether or not they really have been abandoned and looking at the effects, if any, their absence has had.

It is the contention of some theorists that we have entered a 'post-historic'

⁹⁶ *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv, 37.

⁹⁷ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1942), x.

⁹⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), 434.

society in which the grand narrative of history has been dismantled and left behind. Baudrillard's explanation is that life has been accelerated to such a degree by recent technological and scientific innovations that we have been propelled to 'escape velocity', with the result that we have: 'Flown free from the referential sphere of the real and of history'. Because developments in the media now bring us images from every corner of the world just as soon as they happen, the concepts of time and space, which are integral components of the historical narrative, are imploded: 'We shall never know again what history was before its exacerbation into the technical perfection of news: we shall never again know what anything was before disappearing into the fulfillment of its model'. Baudrillard does not attribute the demise of history to recent developments alone, however. Rather he claims that the ease with which history was replaced by its representation, television news, is proof that history was never anything other than a constructed narrative to begin with: 'History itself has always, deep down, been an immense simulation model'⁹⁹. The reason this model, and other corresponding models such as time, were created in the first place, according to Rushkoff, was to provide us with a framework within which to structure life: 'Provided a framework in which unpredictable events could appear less threatening within an overall "order" of things'¹⁰⁰. Now that the divisions of time and space have been overridden by inventions such as the Internet, however, these structuring models have become untenable.

An important consequence of Baudrillard's ahistoric world of endless presents, in which signs refer not to specific meanings but back to themselves in endless self-generation, is that language itself becomes devalued. Given that many postmodernists insist that the symbols and images of language are all we have¹⁰¹, the dismantling of language and its relationship between signifiers and signifieds threatens the stability of our identities. Jameson draws on the Lacanian theory of schizophrenia, which results from a breakdown in the signifying chain (the series of signifiers that constitutes an utterance or meaning), to describe this effect on the psyche: 'With the breakdown of the

⁹⁹ *The Illusion of the End*, 1, 6, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Douglas Rushkoff, *Cyberia: Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 204.

¹⁰¹ See Webster, *Theories of the Information Society*, 175.

signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material Signifiers, or in other words of a series of pure and unrelated presents in time'¹⁰². A related consequence is that the juxtaposed images of certain art-forms may no longer be connected coherently by the spectator: 'It is no longer certain... that the heavily charged and monitory juxtapositions in a Godard film... will be put back together by the spectator in the form of a message, let alone the right message'¹⁰³. There is, of course, another possible consequence of this disconnection of language from its meaning, for this freedom from specificity means that language can constantly reinvent itself. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the potential power of one of these free-floating linguistic phrases is given in Heller's *Catch-22*, which illustrates that it is precisely this inability to verify the existence of the phrase 'Catch-22' that renders it inviolable: 'Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up'¹⁰⁴. A similar power is invested in the many linguistic constructs that dominate Pynchon's novels, and like 'Catch-22', it is the very fact that the existence of V, the Trystero or Them cannot be verified that makes them omnipotent. Moreover lest we think that these all-encompassing words and phrases exist only in fiction, it is worth pointing out that 'for the good of the country', Milo Minderbinder's disclaimer for all his actions, is an echo of a phrase frequently used by Benjamin Franklin!¹⁰⁵

Of course, as I have already mentioned, the interesting point about many of the linguistic traps that feature in these novels is the belief among the characters that life would be much worse without their structuring presence. The instinctive reaction of those living in a chaotic, unnarrated world is thus to surround themselves at least with the illusion that they are being narrated. One widespread characteristic of contemporary living is, accordingly, an obsession with the exhaustive recording of every detail of life.

¹⁰² "Postmodernism", 72.

¹⁰³ *Postmodernism*, 191.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (GB: Vintage, 1994), 516.

¹⁰⁵ David Seed, *The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1989), 66.

Coupland's characters constantly engage in this attempt to narrate themselves even at the most inappropriate and intimate moments: 'As I type this in, I feel small arms around my neck and a kiss on my jugular' (*Microserfs*, 58). Incidentally, what the narrator is being forgiven for in this instance is the almost unforgivable sin of forgetting his one-month anniversary, for these temporal demarcations are extremely important in an increasingly unstructured world. This obsession with recording is, of course, often taken to extremes: 'My girlfriend, was big on anniversaries. We celebrated them constantly.... It could be almost anything: the anniversary of the day we met or the first night we slept together.... It could be a month since then, ten weeks or nine lunar cycles – it didn't seem to matter'¹⁰⁶. If this constant use of even the smallest milestones to give life some structure is one way in which a sense of history and time is reclaimed, another option is an immersion in nostalgia. The plethora of recent retrospective novels and movies, Pynchon's *Vineland* and DeLillo's *Underworld*, for example, cannot really be described as historical because what they offer is images, simulacra and pastiches of the past. They are, according to Jameson, effectively a way of dealing with the fact that history has been obliterated: 'A way of satisfying a chemical craving for historicity, using a product that substitutes for and blocks it'¹⁰⁷. The overwhelming consensus among certain theorists of the postmodern is thus that history, as a metanarrative, has been dismantled and replaced with various linguistic constructs designed to cover up – if not to fill – the void left in its wake.

The second metanarrative under attack in postmodernism is the family, which, as Toffler remarks, has traditionally been the 'great shock absorber' of society: 'The place to which the bruised and battered individual returns after doing battle with the world, the one stable point in an increasingly flux-filled environment'¹⁰⁸. Some theorists argue that liberation from the stranglehold of the family is a welcome development. Jameson, for example, hails the attack carried out by Deleuze and Guattari on Freudianism, which he describes as: 'A reduction and a rewriting of the whole rich and

¹⁰⁶ Walter Kirm, "Can't Get Started". From Rushkoff, ed., *The GenX Reader*, 110.

¹⁰⁷ Stephanson, "Regarding Postmodernism A Conversation with Frederic Jameson". From Ross, ed., 18.

¹⁰⁸ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (GB: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1970), 211.

random multiple realities of concrete everyday experience into the contained, strategically prelimited terms of the family narrative', as a liberating and positive act¹⁰⁹. Other theorists point to statistics that appear to indicate that the family is increasingly in peril: 'A four-hundred-and-nineteen percent increase in illegitimate babies, a quadrupling in divorce rates, a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes'¹¹⁰. Coincident with this weakening of the family is the increase of its fictional representations, mirroring the proliferation of the nostalgia movie as a replacement for history, which was discussed above. Goodman points to the popularity of television series, such as *M*A*S*H* and *The Waltons*, which offer the viewer a 'foster community' and a 'foster family' respectively, as a sign that the waning of the real family has been a popular concern in America since the 1970's¹¹¹. Goodman's point is reiterated by Lee Rich, one of the producers of *The Waltons*, who reasons that: 'The success of this series is because of what is going on in the country today, the loss of values. Many people see ethical qualities in this family that they hope to get back to'¹¹². Given that history is unlikely to reassert itself against its representation by television, one could perhaps conclude that the same fate awaits the family.

The fear that the family as an institution has had its day is, I think, overly pessimistic and unsupported by actuality. Certainly the traditional patriarchal, nuclear family has been destabilized in much of the Western world. It has generally been replaced, however, by a new model more relevant to contemporary lifestyles. Goodman explains, for example, that increased work commitments have meant that while our sense of belonging to a neighbourhood may be weaker, our sense of belonging to a work place is stronger¹¹³. This theory is borne out by the replacement of the family-oriented television series of the past with dramas centering on various 'families' of

¹⁰⁹ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As A Socially Symbolic Act* (UK: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1981), 21-2.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Daniel Bell, "The Disunited States of America", *TLS* (9 June, 1995), 16.

¹¹¹ Ellen Goodman, "M*A*S*H: Community Affair", *The Washington Post* (Saturday, 5 March, 1983), A23.

¹¹² Quoted in Horace Newcomb, ed., *Television: The Critical View* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 9.

¹¹³ "M*A*S*H: Community Affair", A23.

lawyers, doctors, and so on. A less narrowly defined definition of what constitutes a family also provides a model for contemporary society, with many people now drawing on a network of friends and extended family for support. Again, this model is reflected in television series, such as *Friends*, in which the 'family' group is comprised of six friends, only two of whom are actually related. Although family, as will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, constitutes a central theme for each of the four authors on whom I will be focusing, it exists primarily in this evolved and mutated form: The family reunion with which Pynchon's *Vineland* ends, for example, includes not only Prairie's ancestors, the Becker and Traverse families, and her estranged parents, Frenesi and Zoyd, but also her newly discovered step-father, Hub Gates, and step-brother, Justin (369). The ranks of the Gladney family, in DeLillo's *White Noise*, are similarly swelled by occasional visits and phone-calls from various ex-spouses and step-children, including Jack's ex-wives Tweedy Browner (85), Dana Breedlove (whom he married twice) and Janet Savory (213), and his daughter Bee (92); while Nick Shay's journey into the past in search of his missing father, in *Underworld*, brings him into contact with multiple families of artists (70), waste specialists (185), baseball fanatics (168) and petty criminals (204). Nor is the family unit completely missing from the less conventional fiction of Ellis and Coupland. Although the biological family unit is revealed to be seriously flawed and dysfunctional throughout Ellis' novels, his lost and confused students continue to huddle together, sometimes going to absurd lengths to fool themselves into believing that they are not alone: 'I didn't think the surfer was talking to anyone; that he was pretending to be talking and that there was no one listening at the other end and all I could keep thinking was is it better to pretend to talk than not to talk at all' (*Less Than Zero*, 200). Coupland's characters go to even greater lengths, merging both family and friendships in an almost claustrophobic bid for security: the co-workers in *Microserfs* bring their friendship to a higher level when they all move briefly in with the narrator's family: 'For financial reasons, we have to work at Mom and Dad's place' (117); while the six school-friends in *Girlfriend in a Coma* merge into three couples, before eventually moving into the same house when the world ends: 'Richard, looking at all of their lives from a distance, sees the recurring pattern

here... a pattern in which the five of his friends seem destined always to return to their quiet little neighbourhood' (141-2). One conclusion that could be drawn from this evidence is that although the traditional patriarchal family may have been destabilized by the postmodern dismantling of narratives, it continues to exist in an evolved form and to provide its members with the sense of security and belonging they need to face the increasingly chaotic external world. In many ways, the family is thus stronger than ever before.

Given the human reliance on narratives as a means of structuring the world, it is no wonder that the most enduring narrative of all is that which purports to explain all aspects of life right from its origins – namely the metanarrative of religion. The dominant position of religion in many cultures is partly attributable to its claim to provide a blueprint for life: 'An otherwise chaotic world makes sense because it is perceived as a plot, narrated by God'. The disappearance of this God would, it is feared, rob the world of all meaning: 'Physical universe becomes a clutter of debris, lacking all transcendence; life becomes an accident of matter'¹¹⁴. Certainly the overwhelming consensus among theorists of the postmodern is that God has indeed disappeared. Lyotard, for example, declares that: 'God has withdrawn from the world, abandoning it to the violence and vanity of arts and works' (*Postmodern Fables*, 172). Various explanations for His disappearance are tendered. Baudrillard, as we would expect, suggests that, like history, God was only always a construction, erected to save us from the knowledge that we exist in a meaningless void: 'If something does not exist, you have to believe in it. Belief is not the reflection of existence, it is *there for existence*, just as a language is not a reflection of meaning, but is there in place of meaning' (*The Illusion of the End*, 92). For Baudrillard, therefore, God has not so much disappeared as revealed to be a fraud. Other theorists are adamant that there is a more concrete reason for the demise of God. Mailer, for example, claims that modern atrocities, often committed in the name of God, are the reason religion has been undermined to such an

¹¹⁴ Scott Sanders, "Pynchon's Paranoid History", *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 21, no. 2 (May 1975), 177. The retreat into paranoia, which is one way of ensuring that the world continues to appear to be ordered by an omnipotent force, will be discussed later on in relation to Pynchon's fiction.

extreme: 'Until churches can offer an explanation for Buchenwald, or Siberia or Hiroshima, they are only giving solace to the unimaginative'¹¹⁵. Compelling though Mailer's argument may be, O'Connor insists that the dismantling of religion is located further back in history. The characters who populate her novel *Wise Blood*, for example, imply that the emptiness of the religious narrative was apparent in the early decades of this century: 'I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth' (159). The retreat into paranoia and superstition illustrated by so many of Pynchon's and DeLillo's characters, and the consensus among Ellis' and Coupland's characters that they are living in a godless universe – one of Coupland's novels is called *Life After God*¹¹⁶ – would appear to indicate that the metanarrative of religion is not very stable in much of contemporary American fiction.

Once more, as I illustrated above in relation to the family, all is not as it initially seems for the inexplicable, yet irrefutable, fact is that America continues to be regarded as a 'religious country'. One visible indication of this is the prayers that continue to be offered before important sports fixtures and political events¹¹⁷. It is one of the more fascinating paradoxes of America, as Bruce remarks, that: 'A large part of the population of one of the most advanced and productive industrial economies in the world...believe that God created the world in six days'¹¹⁸. In fact so completely has the modernist rationality and secularization of the world been overturned in recent decades that one sociologist of religion describes the period from the 1960's to the present as one of a third 'Great Awakening': 'Yet another of a series of moments in American history when spiritual preoccupations intensify and new spiritualities flourish'¹¹⁹. This is certainly borne out statistically, for membership of religious congregations has almost

¹¹⁵ Norman Mailer, *The Time of Our Time* (US: Random House, Inc., 1998), 533.

¹¹⁶ Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (GB: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

¹¹⁷ Stewart M. Hoover, "Television Myth and Ritual: The Role of Substantive Meaning and Spatiality". From James W. Carey, ed., *Media, Myths and Narratives: Television and the Press* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1988), 168.

¹¹⁸ Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1.

¹¹⁹ John A. McClure, "Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality". *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Spring 1995), 142.

doubled in the twenty-five years after World War II, increasing from seventy-four million, in 1946, to one-hundred-and-thirty-one million, in 1970¹²⁰. Given the turbulent and often frightening nature of the events that took place during this period, it is probably safe to surmise that this return to organized religion indicated a need for guidance and support among many of the American people. Significantly, religion also became a factor in presidential campaigns, with all three candidates in 1980, Reagan, Carter and Anderson, declaring their religious convictions¹²¹. Despite initial indications that the metanarrative of religion had been destabilized in America, therefore, all the evidence suggests that rumours of its demise have been exaggerated.

Much in the same way as the institution of the family has survived in contemporary society by reinventing itself, so too has religion had to restructure. The multiple new religious cults and movements depicted in Pynchon's *Vineland*, ranging from Native American and African traditions, to oriental martial arts traditions, to American transcendentalism, constitute examples of how various religious micronarratives have been adopted to replace an all-encompassing metanarrative. Elsewhere, examples abound of religious narratives that have managed to survive by allying themselves with dominant contemporary social forces. The connection made by Weber between capitalism and Puritanism¹²² is well known and relevant to the present discussion, for consumerism continues to be regarded as a source of transcendence and spiritual relief. The extract from Miller with which I opened this thesis emphasizes a belief that shopping is the cure for all ills, an idea echoed by many fictional characters – most notably, perhaps, the Gladneys of *White Noise* who, along with their friend Murray Siskind, speak of being spiritually recharged by a visit to the supermarket: 'It's full of psychic data' (37). One of the Gladney daughters, Steffie, unconsciously adopts a brand-name, Toyota Celica, as a surprisingly effective mantra: 'Beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder....How could these near-nonsense

¹²⁰ Norton et al. 936.

¹²¹ Douglas Tallack, *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context* (GB: Longman Group UK Ltd., 1991), 7.

¹²² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1985), 35.

words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence?' (155). As well as investing commodities with this touch of transcendence, consumerism also supports the growth of organized religion by awakening in the consumer the belief that there can indeed be a spiritual dimension to life: 'Consumerism threw a new "sacred canopy" over everyday life, promising that the mundane could be instantly transformed, even transcended'¹²³. Unlikely though it might seem, therefore, consumerism and religion apparently continue to be linked as Weber insisted they would.

It is no great surprise that the mass media should also play an important role in the recent religious revival for, along with consumerism, they dominate nearly every aspect of contemporary social life. According to Hoover, the electronic media have been at the centre of the resurgence of religious and social consciousness since the 1960's, playing the dual role of shaping the consciousness of the audience and of convincing the American public that the country is indeed in the middle of a great cultural and religious change¹²⁴. The appearance of religious programs on the national air-waves has come to be referred to as 'televangelism' or 'the electronic church'. Certainly television exposure has brought religious issues to the forefront. Charismatic preachers such as Billy Graham and Jesse Jackson have enjoyed increased popularity through their extensive use of the mass media as a pulpit from which to preach. The 1994 appointment of the first network-level religious affairs reporter by ABC is further confirmation that religion has become an important part of American life¹²⁵. There is, however, a feeling among many observers that television is devaluing, rather than promoting, religious dogma. This is perhaps attributable to the fact that the medium of television, as Baudrillard illustrates, is essentially anti-mediatory and intransitive, and that all messages transmitted through the medium are thus negated even as they are

¹²³ Graham Murdock, "The Re-Enchantment of the World: Religion and the Transformations of Modernity". From Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1997), 91.

¹²⁴ Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1988), 19-20.

¹²⁵ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1998), 18.

being broadcast¹²⁶. Another factor is, of course, the high cost of airtime which means that the content of religious programs is generally tailored to suit the convictions of its sponsors or, in the case of cable, its paying customers. This rewriting of the religious message: 'In practice, the paid-time religious broadcasters have subtly reversed these early principles of the Christian faith: whatever evokes a popular response is seen as an indication of the truth of the message and of God's blessing'¹²⁷, is a shocking example of the reduction of everything to the status of a commodity or package for which the consumerist and media-dominated society of the present is renowned¹²⁸. Unlike the metanarrative of the family, therefore, religion, although surviving as a source of hope and comfort for many, is generally thought to have become cheapened by the very forces on which its resurgence seemed to be based.

The dismantling of traditional grand narratives is, as I have illustrated, a central concern of postmodern theory. It is also an extremely problematic area, not least because although some metanarratives have indeed been undermined they have managed to reestablish themselves in newer and more enduring forms. One trap into which some theorists appear to fall is their failure to recognize that their own theorizing must also be regarded as fallible and temporary. Lyotard's absolute rejection of the metanarrative, for example, can itself be regarded as a totalizing discourse¹²⁹. The dualistic choice between one metanarrative and a series of micronarratives offered by some theorists is strongly criticized by Eagleton as constituting the very opposite to what postmodernism purports to offer: 'This all-or-nothingness ill befits a supposedly non-binary theory. What if there are a plurality of metanarratives?' (*The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 110). This last remark points to an integral component of postmodernism, namely the concept of multiplicity, for postmodernism is not at all an attack on the narrative per se, but rather on the idea that there exists one

¹²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 169.

¹²⁷ Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience* (New York: Longman, Inc., 1984), 29.

¹²⁸ This is a point also made in *Wise Blood*, in which O.J. stresses the importance of presenting religion in a favourable light: 'If you want to get anywhere in religion, you got to keep it sweet' (151).

¹²⁹ Best and Kellner, 171.

unchallengeable, all-encompassing narrative. As Eagleton explains: ‘What postmodernism refuses is not history but History – the idea that there is an entity called history possessed of an imminent meaning and purpose which is stealthily unfolding around us even as we speak’ (*The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 30). Although postmodernism rejects the idea that our lives are structured by a single grand narrative, therefore, it celebrates the fact that our world is dominated more than ever before by a veritable explosion of sounds, images and multiple micronarratives. As Brooks puts it: ‘We still live today in the age of narrative plots, consuming avidly...television serials and daily comic strips, creating and demanding narrative in the presentation of persons and news events and sports contests’¹³⁰. One of the most enduring of recent narratives has been the privileging of self, which grew out of the newly found freedom enjoyed by the youth culture since the 1950’s. One of the consequences of this glorification of self has been the creation of what Appleyard calls ‘the cosmetic society’, in which clothes, makeup and, above all, the cultivation of the body is privileged¹³¹. This increasing preoccupation with surfaces constitutes another central component of postmodernism and will now be discussed in more detail.

Oscar Wilde’s remark that: ‘It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible’¹³² could well be adopted as a mantra by many of the young characters in the fiction of Ellis and Coupland, obsessed as they are with outward appearances. Their insistence on defining each other in terms of the brand-names they are displaying: ‘He’s wearing a linen suit by Canali Milano, a cotton shirt by Ike Behar, a silk tie by Bill Blass and cap-toed leather lace-ups from Brooks Brothers’ (*American Psycho*, 30); ‘Look...A Tricia Nixon Dress – that’s *so* cool’¹³³, is part of a wider tendency within postmodernism to privilege surface over depth. Indeed the contention of some theorists is that depth is simply not a feature of a world defined by its superficiality and flatness. Baudrillard, for example, claims that the psychological depth explored and analyzed by Freud in the late

¹³⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (US: Harvard University Press, 1992), 7.

¹³¹ Bryan Appleyard, “Where Are We Going?” *Sunday Times Magazine* (7 February, 1999), 39.

¹³² Quoted in Waugh, 48.

¹³³ Douglas Coupland, *Polaroids From The Dead* (London: Flamingo, 1997), 9.

nineteenth and twentieth centuries no longer characterizes late twentieth century human beings, because postmodern humans experience themselves as 'surface phenomena without depth' and their interactions with each other as occurring without distance: 'As if all life were reduced to the immediacy and flat surface of the computer or television screen'¹³⁴. I will be returning to the complicity of the forces of consumerism and the mass media in the creation of such an image-ridden society in a later section of this introductory chapter. Before leaving the subject of the superficiality of contemporary life, however, it is interesting to see that Baudrillard is himself accused by some critics of falling victim to the world of surfaces about which he theorizes. Best and Kellner complain that his theories lack depth themselves and are more like advertizing slogans than profound conceptualizations, giving: 'Little precise analysis, explication, or illustration'. Baudrillard's comments about American society are dismissed because they fail to really see the problems defining contemporary life there: 'Baudrillard speeds through the desert of America and merely sees signs floating by. He looks at Reagan on television and sees only his smile. He hangs out in southern California and concludes that the United States is a realized utopia. He fails to see, however, the homeless, the poor....' (138). Given that Reagan is an ex-actor who was elected to the Presidency mainly on the basis of the image he portrayed, it is possible that Best and Kellner are slightly missing the point here. Certainly social problems do abound in America, as they do everywhere else. However, the focus of interest for theorists such as Baudrillard lies in the endless proliferation of the signs and images of consumerism and the mass media that swamp society and constitute a major part of contemporary cultural life.

Once again, consumerism and the mass media emerge as dominant players in the above, as in every other, aspect of contemporary life discussed so far. Before proceeding to a detailed examination of these forces, there is one final aspect of postmodernism that merits a mention: the general collapse of boundaries between previously distinct categories. Jameson emphasizes the obliteration of distinctions between high and low art forms that has led to the postmodern fascination with the: 'Whole "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch, of television series and *Reader's*

¹³⁴ Quoted in Springer, *Electronic Eros*, 43.

Digest culture, of advertizing and motels, of the late show and grade-B Hollywood film'. The result of this mixing of genres is that commercial culture is no longer 'quoted' and parodied in Joycean fashion but incorporated directly into postmodern art ("Postmodernism", 55). Poster points to the media as an important source of this dismantling of divisions, for they mix audiences normally kept separate in the course of daily life: 'Electronic media blur the lines between institutionally structured subgroups' (44). This example has close links with McLuhan's prophecy that technological innovations would eventually implode structures such as time and space and turn the whole world into a 'global village', with each part of it instantly accessible to any other: 'The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village'¹³⁵. This argument is carried to its extreme by Baudrillard who claims that electronics have done no less than disestablish the boundaries between the real and its representation or image, for as information begins to circulate at the speed of light, it is no longer possible to tell them apart. He cites the Polaroid camera, which produces an immediate image of the subject thus allowing the real and its representation to co-exist almost simultaneously, as one example where the boundaries between them are collapsed (*America*, 37). Of course as far as Baudrillard is concerned, the 'real' does not exist anymore, and so the true task of the representation is to hide this fact from us. He cites Disneyland, which appears to be 'a play of illusions and phantasms', as one example of a phenomenon designed to persuade us that 'the rest is real', when in fact: 'All of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation'. For Baudrillard, therefore, the distinction between real and representation has imploded to such a degree that it is no longer possible to salvage the 'real', only the 'reality principle' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 12-3). The effect of such theorizing has been a widespread scepticism towards the existence of the real, and a privileging of the representation or image as the source of meaning.

One final example I want to examine of the merger of real and representation is the relationship between contemporary fiction and the world in which it is set. Waugh

¹³⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 31.

suggests that some postmodern fiction appears to be written by authors who, having read the work of the theorists, look at the world with the intention of finding confirmation of what they assume postmodern society should be like (3). The most useful contemporary fiction is thus, according to Federman, that which is aware of the many constructions shaping the present world and undertakes a thorough investigation of fiction itself. He calls this type of fiction ‘Surfiction’: ‘Not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality’¹³⁶. Certainly the boundaries between some postmodern theory and fiction are not too obvious. Baudrillard’s more fanciful theorizing has been likened both to science fiction and to an advertizing slogan: ‘A hyper-commodity, geared to sell and promote the latest fashions in thought and attitude’¹³⁷. On the other hand, the depth of knowledge revealed in many contemporary fictional texts – the teenagers in Ellis’ and Coupland’s novels give us a wealth of detail about the brand-names, cosmetics and social mores of the present – as well as the theorizing in which the authors themselves often indulge, means that many recent American novels reveal as much about the sociology of the culture as they do about the fictional characters they portray.

One particularly good example of the latter is Coupland’s *Generation X* which, littered as it is with helpful explanations and descriptions of contemporary culture, is more like a ‘user’s guide’ to the period than a fictional text. It includes definitions of such phenomena as: ‘Successophobia: The fear that if one is successful, then one’s personal needs will be forgotten and one will no longer have one’s childish needs catered for’; ‘Survivalousness: The tendency to visualize oneself enjoying being the last remaining person on Earth’; and ‘Bradyism: A multisibling sensibility derived from having grown up in large families’¹³⁸. Postmodern fiction also displays many of the characteristics discussed above in relation to society at large. Hilfer draws attention to the fact that the postmodern world portrayed in many novels is: ‘Empty of presence – though replete with false signs of it’ (128), an apt description of Pynchon’s work; while

¹³⁶ Raymond Federman, ed., *Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1975), 7.

¹³⁷ Best and Kellner, 140.

¹³⁸ Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* (GB: Abacus, 1996), 30, 62, 134.

Davey focuses on the ‘multiplicity of aesthetics and discourses’ and the ‘decentred, discontinuous forms’, which manifest themselves in the splintering of the narrative voice into multiple, often unidentified, voices, and in the abandonment of the linear narrative in favour of a more fluid and unstable structure¹³⁹. It is not my intention in this thesis to offer a reading of the texts in question based on postmodern literary theory, for some of the novels I will be discussing do not appear to fulfill all, or even most, of the criteria normally associated with postmodern art. It could be argued, for example, that although DeLillo clearly situates his fiction within the image- and commodity-ridden world of the present, the generally traditional, linear structure of his novels precludes their inclusion in the genre of postmodern fiction¹⁴⁰. I do believe, however, that an understanding of the cultural and social changes described by postmodernism – most importantly the disestablishment of traditional metanarratives, the privileging of surface and the collapse of divisions between previously distinct categories – is vital in order to understand the world in which the authors situate their texts, and I will continue to draw attention to these characteristics as they become relevant to my argument.

So far, this introductory chapter has examined the historical and theoretical developments which, it is argued, have influenced the character and identity of contemporary society. Although the effects of this influence and its resulting manifestations in society were shown to be many and varied, I continually drew attention to the fact that a common denominator exists in the form of consumerism and the mass media which emerged as dominant social forces in the 1950’s and are generally acknowledged, if not to have actually created many of the characteristics of the present world, at least to have propagated and spread their influence throughout society. The next section of this chapter will offer a detailed examination of these forces, describing their dominant characteristics and focusing particularly on the way in

¹³⁹ Frank Davey, *Reading Canadian Reading* (Canada: Turnstone Press, 1988), 106.

¹⁴⁰ A number of critics have called attention to the modernist characteristics of some of DeLillo’s work. Frank Lentricchia, for example, describes the author as: ‘Last of the modernists’. *New Essays on “White Noise”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 14; while Leonard Wilcox argues convincingly that Jack Gladney, in *White Noise*, is: ‘A modernist displaced in a postmodern world’. ‘Baudrillard, DeLillo’s *White Noise* and the End of the Heroic Narrative’, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Fall 1991), 348.

which they inscribe their values both on the individual and on the surrounding environment.

Although there is a general consensus that consumerism is one of the identifying features of contemporary American society, the timing of its emergence as a dominant ethos is a matter of some debate. Jameson is adamant that the trend, which he regards as constituting the heart of postmodernism, began in the immediate post-World War II years: 'When multinational corporations began to control the world's economic and cultural systems and the driving force behind organization became the perpetual consumption of goods' (*Postmodernism*, xx). Historical evidence, as was demonstrated earlier in the chapter, certainly supports Jameson's argument, for the unexpected post-war affluence not only fostered a culture of spending but led to the development of many of the inventions without which society today would be very different – the opening of the first fully-enclosed mall in 1956 and the launch of the first jet plane in 1952 being but two examples¹⁴¹. There are, however, those who insist that the bond between American society and consumerism goes much deeper into the past than Jameson acknowledges. Weber, for example, refers to complaints about a 'peculiarly calculating sort of profit-seeking' among the colonizers of New England as early as 1632, which would appear to prove that: 'In the country of Benjamin Franklin's birth...the spirit of capitalism...was present before the capitalistic order' (55). While Weber attributes this trait to the dominance of the Puritan religion, O'Connor explains that it is tied to the prevailing national American ideology which he says is: 'Individualism in all its forms'. Furthermore, because the classical liberal doctrine of individuality is based on ownership of autonomous property, it has been easy for those who own the means of production to convince the individual that he/she will acquire status as the number of commodities he/she owns increases¹⁴². Whatever its origins, there is no doubt that the spirit of consumerism is a significant presence in contemporary American society. Statistics reveal that by the beginning of the 1990's, Americans were spending an average of twelve hours a month in shopping malls – more

¹⁴¹ Ritzer, *Expressing America*, 31.

¹⁴² James O'Connor, *Accumulation Crisis* (New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1984), 3, 19.

time than they devoted to almost any activity other than sleeping, eating, working and watching television¹⁴³. It is thus no surprise that the inhabitants of America's postmodern cities, as described by theorists like Baudrillard, as well as the fictional characters I will be discussing below, are so often regarded as engaging in a complex play with the surfeit of signs that swamp their environment courtesy of the forces of consumerism and the mass media.

Having established that consumerism does play a prominent role in the shaping of contemporary society, the important question is whether its effects on its subjects are beneficial or detrimental. There is, certainly, some evidence that an adherence to certain brands of commodities can foster a sense of connection among otherwise isolated individuals: 'Invisible new communities were created and preserved by how and what men consumed'¹⁴⁴. Coupland's teens, for example, bond over their obsession with hair-care products: 'Your hair is you – your tribe – it's your badge of clean. Hair is your document. What's on top of your head says what's inside your head' (*Shampoo Planet*, 7). Generally, however, the consensus is that consumerism is a repressive and restricting force. Adorno rejects as illusory the Marxist belief that when unfettered from capitalist relations of production, capitalist forces of production will generate a free society. On the contrary, he sees the underlying drift of capitalism as tending towards further integration and domination¹⁴⁵. One way in which this domination is effected is by convincing the consumer that his/her needs can be fulfilled – needs, incidentally, constructed by this very system. Marx offers an interesting example of this conditioning when he points to the almost unilateral acceptance that food can no longer be eaten without the proper utensils: 'Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a *different hunger* from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth'. The inevitable conclusion he draws is that production not only produces the commodity but also dictates the manner of its

¹⁴³ Bill Bryson, *Made in America* (GB: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd., 1994), 258.

¹⁴⁴ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York and London: The Penguin Group, 1973), 89.

¹⁴⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 3.

consumption¹⁴⁶. Eco's claim that Disneyland provides the most appropriate allegory of the consumer society: 'A place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots'¹⁴⁷ certainly appears to be borne out by the examples presented above.

Commentators also accuse many of those in charge of the production of commodities of exercising undue power and influence over the consumer. The credit card, which ironically is often hailed as the source of ultimate freedom for the consumer, granting him/her mobility and the capacity to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of his/her goals, is also an important source of information for the banks and manufacturers as it documents the consumer's spending patterns and habits¹⁴⁸. Some critics worry that this increasing violation of privacy will lead to widespread repression. Bauman, for example, compares the Nazi Holocaust to an efficiently run consumer society, claiming that the well-designed and carefully calculated gassing process had an 'assembly-line quality' about it¹⁴⁹. Although extreme, Bauman's warning resonates in many late twentieth-century texts in the form of repressive social presences like Heller's 'Catch-22', Kesey's 'Combine'¹⁵⁰ and Pynchon's 'Them', all designed to keep the individual in line. The reality is that while the consumer may be presented with a wide variety of commodities, this sense of choice is illusory for he/she can only choose between commodities already selected by those who own the means of production. McLuhan's argument that the importance attached to information about consumers' preferred brands and products actually empowers the consumer, who can effect the discontinuance of certain products simply by not buying them¹⁵¹, is, I think, overly optimistic and does not address the reality of the situation which is that the consumer is still limited to rejecting only products pre-selected by market controllers. The expansion of the markets and an increase in personal disposable income does not, therefore, mean more actual freedom for the consumer, but rather the enhancement of an illusion. Much

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Robert D'Amico, "Desire and the Commodity Form", *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Radical Thought*, no. 35 (Spring 1985), 94.

¹⁴⁷ Umberto Eco, "The City of Robots", From Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism*, 205.

¹⁴⁸ Ritzer, *Expressing America*, 27.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, 3.

¹⁵⁰ Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1962), 19.

¹⁵¹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Marshall McLuhan Dew-Line Newsletter*, vol. 1, no. iv (June 1969).

as Disneyland, according to Baudrillard, exists in order to foster the illusion that everything outside it is real, so too is this apparent abundance of choice designed to blind us to the actual lack of alternatives existing in contemporary society.

In a consumer society, consumption is not of course limited to the purchase of goods but appears to influence almost every sphere of life. Its influence on the surrounding culture is noted by Jameson who remarks that: 'In postmodernism, everyone has learned to consume culture through television and the mass media....Everything is culture, the culture of the commodity'¹⁵². In fact so widespread is this influence that the consumer society, as he points out in *Postmodernism*, seems to have become a commodity itself and is thus subject to the same controlling forces described above: 'In postmodern culture, "culture" has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself' (x). One visible manifestation of this commodification of culture is the reduction of works of art to saleable goods. Indeed, as Adorno points out, art is increasingly judged on the basis of its market value: 'Works of art are commodities....since they are valuable only to the extent that they can be exchanged' (*The Culture Industry*, 9). The ultimate example of this trend is the art of Andy Warhol, which not only has a high market value but also has as its subject the commodification both of objects, such as tinned soup, and of human stars, such as Marilyn Monroe, who are themselves: 'Commodified and transformed into their own images'¹⁵³. One interesting result of the application of this system of values is the increasing dependence on guidebooks and other such manuals as a prerequisite to enjoying art. The hero of James' *The American*, for example, visits the Louvre but looks only at those paintings recommended in his tourist guide: 'He had looked out all the pictures to which an asterisk was affixed in those formidable pages of fine print in Baedeker' (19). Serious though the situation was when James wrote his novel in 1877, the commodification of culture had advanced to such a degree by the time Pynchon wrote his first novel *V*, in 1963, that the entire world depicted therein is based on

¹⁵² Stephanson, "Regarding Postmodernism: A Conversation with Frederic Jameson". From Ross, ed., 26.

¹⁵³ Jameson, "Postmodernism", 61.

descriptions taken directly from the same Baedeker and is thus defined by superficiality and objectification: 'He was that sort of vagrant who exists, though unwillingly, entirely within the Baedeker world – as much a feature of the topography as the other automata: waiters, porters, cabmen, clerks. Taken for granted'¹⁵⁴. The fact that even language has been reduced to a sequence of meaningless preconstructed phrases in *V*: 'Conversations at the Spoon had become little more than proper nouns, literary allusions, critical or philosophical terms linked in certain ways' (297), means that the characters are truly trapped in their commodified environment, unable even to articulate their predicament.

Some critics continue to regard the ubiquitous presence of commodities in society as a positive thing. McCracken, for example, declares that far from representing the 'unhappy, destructive preoccupation of a materialist society', consumer goods constitute one of the chief instruments of its survival and one of the ways in which order is maintained¹⁵⁵. By choosing to belong to a specific cultural category, therefore, the consumer has found a way to express and safeguard his/her identity. Most commentators interpret this situation very differently, claiming that the reduction of the self to a cipher pointing to one or other of the available cultural categories puts it at serious risk of being destroyed. McLuhan points to the privileging of a female's legs as constituting one of the ways in which she is objectified and reduced to a collection of parts: 'Legs today have been indoctrinated.... They have large audiences. They are taken on dates'¹⁵⁶. Similarly, Haug insists that when makeup is applied the face ceases to be the property of the individual, becoming instead an advertizement for the cosmetics company: 'By gaining a new (made-up) face, one simultaneously loses one's own'¹⁵⁷. Certainly the hoards of identical looking youth who roam through Ellis' novel: 'They all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices' (*Less Than Zero*, 152), testify not to the health of the individual psyche, as McCracken suggests, but rather to its subjugation and eventual obliteration

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *V* (GB: Picador, 1975), 70.

¹⁵⁵ Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), xi.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., *Essential McLuhan* (GB: Routledge, 1997), 25.

¹⁵⁷ W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertizing in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 76.

by the brand names with which it surrounds itself. Another obvious problem with the definition of the self through commodities is what Toffler calls the 'throw-away' nature of contemporary culture. Toffler's description refers to the ever-changing and short-lived character of today's consumer fads. Fast-shifting preferences, combined with high-speed technological changes, lead not only to frequent changes in the popularity of brands, he claims, but also shortens the life cycle of products¹⁵⁸. Given that almost every aspect of contemporary life conforms to this model – celebrity, for example, is both swiftly fabricated and ruthlessly destroyed – basing one's identity on commodities is obviously doomed to leave one feeling confused and abandoned when the fashion moves on.

A very interesting point is made by Williams who draws our attention to the fact that the use of the word 'customer' has declined in favour of 'consumer', a word that points to the increasingly abstract nature of the relationship between the contemporary individual and the image-filled world¹⁵⁹. The latter also implies a more holistic approach for instead of merely paying for an object, as a customer would do, the consumer also buys into the meanings and mythologies that surround a particular commodity. It is for this reason that many of Ellis' characters not only describe themselves and each other in terms of what they are wearing, thus undermining their sense of identity as illustrated above, but also subordinate the clothes themselves to the designer labels they carry: 'Looking very studly in a Comme des Garcons black T-shirt under a black double-breasted jacket, a Cartier Panthere watch wrapped around a semi-hairy wrist, Giorgio Armani prescription sunglasses locked on a pretty decent head'¹⁶⁰. Underlying this relationship between commodity and meaning is a thinly veiled threat, for if emotional satisfaction and self-worth is, as Langman suggests, dependent on one's use of the correct products, a failure to do so is fatal: 'Failure to use products that end foul odours or bathtub rings....can lead to a social fate worse than death'¹⁶¹. Tyler's

¹⁵⁸ *Future Shock*, 49, 66.

¹⁵⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1976), 69.

¹⁶⁰ Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (GB: Picador, 1999), 44.

¹⁶¹ Lauren Langman, "Neon Cages: Shopping For Subjectivity". From Rob Shields, ed., *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1992), 47.

obsession with his haircare products in Coupland's *Shampoo Planet* is, by this criteria, not so much a harmless and amusing quirk as an illustration of his desperate attempt to obey the dictates of the market and thus fit in.

Commodities, as the evidence above demonstrates, derive much of their importance not from their own intrinsic use-value but rather from the meaning with which they are associated. Performing the vital task of connecting object with meaning, as well as broadcasting this connection to the consumer, is advertizing. The influence of advertizing on contemporary society is substantial and emphasized by theorists, such as Baudrillard, who proclaims that: 'Adverts are our only architecture today'¹⁶², a statement that draws our attention to the ways in which it moulds and shapes not only our environment but our own psyches as well. Advertizing has played a vital role in the formation of the American nation right from its beginnings. Boorstin points out that the country actually owes its existence to an advertizement enticing people to come and settle in the New World¹⁶³. Moreover the present-day larger-than-life and mediated character of much of America leads Baudrillard to wonder whether the whole country does not represent a sort of 'advertizing copy' (*America*, 32). Whatever about these claims, advertizing is certainly present as a dominant force in American society, and has managed to infiltrate every age and social group. Langman claims that by the age of five, most children can not only identify various brand names but can actually place them within a hierarchical structure¹⁶⁴. Nor is this bombardment confined to younger viewers. Bryson draws our attention to the fact that each person in America receives on average an incredible thirty-four pounds – some five hundred pieces – of unsolicited junkmail every year!¹⁶⁵ In order to watch a sixty-minute football game during the 1997 Superbowl, moreover, the television viewer was forced to sit through a total of one-hundred-and-thirteen commercials, program trailers and products!¹⁶⁶ The obvious

¹⁶² Quoted in E. Ann Kaplan, "Sexual Difference, Pleasure and the Construction of the Spectator in Music Television", *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 8, nos. 1-2 (1986), 121.

¹⁶³ Daniel J. Boorstin, *Democracy and Its Discontents: Reflections on Everyday America* (New York: Random House, 1971), 26.

¹⁶⁴ Langman, "Neon Cages". From Shields, ed., *Lifestyle Shopping*, 58.

¹⁶⁵ Bill Bryson, *Notes From a Big Country* (GB: Black Swan, 1998), 372.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

conclusion, as Ogilvy points out, is that Madison Avenue has overtaken Wall Street as the symbol of capitalist vulgarity and the principle site of its production of meaning¹⁶⁷. Without the means of transmitting their message, after all, commodities would remain empty of significance and could not wield the same power over the consumer.

There is widespread agreement among critics that advertizing represents one of the most important cultural factors reflecting and moulding contemporary life. One reason their influence is so considerable, according to Williamson, is that while they pervade all forms of the media, they are limited to none and thus combine the power of a vast superstructure with all the advantages of an autonomous existence¹⁶⁸. The relationship between advertizing and the mass media has, incidentally, been somewhat turned on its head in recent times for whereas once advertizing was dependent on the media for transmission, it is now their main source of income. Such is the cost of contemporary communications media that from the 1960's onwards national television stations, as well as the majority of newspapers and magazines, simply could not survive without the revenue derived from advertizements¹⁶⁹. The power wielded by advertizing is also compounded by the fact that what the advertizements sell us are imaginary and symbolic, rather than concrete and thus limited, values. This is related to their ability to assume onto themselves the role traditionally fulfilled by religion or ideology: the creation of structures of meaning because, as Williamson points out, for an advertizement to be successful, it must make its products *mean* something to us, so that by buying the product we feel we are also buying into the values inscribed in it (*Decoding Advertizements*, 12). After all, as one observer puts it, what cosmetics manufacturers are selling us is not lanolin but 'hope'¹⁷⁰. The ironic thing about advertizing, as Meyrowitz indicates, is that while viewers often think of television programs as 'products', themselves as 'consumers', and advertizing as the 'price' paid

¹⁶⁷ David Ogilvy's Foreword to Martin Mayer, *Madison Avenue U.S.A.: The Inside Story of American Advertizing* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1958), 7.

¹⁶⁸ Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertizements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertizing* (New York and London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 1978), 11.

¹⁶⁹ Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1980), 184.

¹⁷⁰ Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*, 74.

to watch the program, the true nature of television business is quite different: the products are in fact the viewers themselves who are sold to advertizers (73). The illusion created by advertizements is, therefore, that the consumer has the freedom of choice whereas they are actually based on the principle that the consumer is completely enmeshed and can 'choose freely' only from the choice he/she is given. Like consumerism in general, advertizing – its prime source of the production of meaning – thus reveals itself to be yet another means by which the consumer, fooled into believing he/she exercises a freedom to choose, is further trapped.

Many commentators seem to regard advertizements as if they contain some kind of supernatural powers of persuasion. Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, point out that consumers often feel compelled to buy and use the products they see advertized even though they see through them¹⁷¹, a phenomenon that Williamson can only attribute to 'magic': 'All consumer products offer magic, and all advertizements are spells' (*Decoding Advertizements*, 141). What Williamson is ignoring is the fact that the success of an advertizement is fully dependent on its ability to touch a nerve within the consumer. Bryson claims that the great breakthrough in twentieth-century advertizing came with the identification and exploitation of what he calls: 'The American consumer's Achilles heel: anxiety' (*Made in America*, 283). Certainly a common theme running through many contemporary advertizements is the embarrassment and inconvenience that will almost inevitably arise if a different (and invariably inferior) brand or product is used. One result of the guilt we are made to feel about perspiration, pimples, wrinkles and countless other biological processes that our ancestors accepted as the natural order of things, according to Mestrovic, is that the postmodern body has become tightly regulated¹⁷². Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of Ellis' *American Psycho*, represents an excellent example of the extent to which the messages of advertizing can be internalized. He not only uses a large number of beauty products, but can give a detailed rundown of their benefits and ingredients: 'The conditioner is also

¹⁷¹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York and London: Verso, 1979), 167.

¹⁷² Stjepan G. Mestrovic, *The Coming Fin De Siecle: An Application of Durkheim's Sociology to Modernity and Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 26.

good – silicone technology permits conditioning benefits without weighing down the hair which can also make you look older’ (26). His subsequent inability to have sex because of an overwhelming compulsion to use only the ‘right’ products: ‘Where is the goddamn *water-soluble spermicidal lubricant*?....Is it a *receptical tip*?’ (102-3), further illustrates the extent to which advertizements have colonized his mind. Bateman’s predicament is also further indication that the proliferation of products available in the marketplace is paralyzing rather than liberating.

Although Bateman’s predicament illustrates the repressive and negative aspects of advertizements, they do also offer some benefits to the consumer. Far from constituting an intrusion, television advertizing, for example, is seen to offer a valuable service to consumers whom it keeps up-to-date with the many transient fashions and trends: ‘If keeping up with or emulating the Joneses was a new version of the American dream, television advertizing provided visual evidence of what the Joneses were buying’¹⁷³. Although this might seem to imply that the average consumer is motivated by greed and envy, the main reason people tend to keep abreast of these developments is in order to feel that they belong to a kind of community – a community that favours a certain make of car or a particular style of clothing or home furnishings. The fundamental reason advertizing works, according to Boorstin, is that it provides a sort of insurance for consumers that if they buy certain products they will not find themselves alone (*The Americans*, 145). One final point that remains to be made about advertizing is that in spite of its repression of individuals like Ellis’ Patrick Bateman, it can also empower the consumer for its campaigns will only be successful if the consumer chooses to buy into its message. I mentioned above that the commodity is often linked to a particular quality or characteristic, and that it is the desire to be associated with the latter that motivates the consumer to buy. Diamonds, for example, have long been marketed as symbols of eternal love. The point is that if the consumer does not like this characteristic, or furthermore cannot decode the message inherent in the advertizement, the campaign fails. Although this might appear to be reflective of the

¹⁷³ Norton et al, 943.

illusion of choice offered in the marketplace, the fact remains that the consumer is an essential participant in the process of meaning transfer that lies at the heart of an advertizement¹⁷⁴. In an indirect, but essential, way, therefore, the consumer is somewhat empowered by advertizing and responsible for the narration of its messages.

Alongside the force of consumerism and its most powerful weapon, advertizing, the mass media are widely acknowledged as constituting an intrinsic part of the contemporary world, hailed by one critic as: 'The central nervous system of modern society'¹⁷⁵; and by another as: 'The principle circulator of the cultural mainstream'¹⁷⁶. Indeed the general consensus is that every other instrument of popular culture pales in comparison with the astonishing growth and influence of television. Although invented in the 1920's and offering limited public services in the 1930's, full investment in television's transmission and reception facilities did not occur until the late the 1940's and early 1950's¹⁷⁷. Growth thereafter was very rapid as statistics indicate¹⁷⁸, and by the 1980's it is estimated that television was on for over seven hours every day in the average American family – with the result that the average individual could be spending an incredible total of ten years of his/her life watching television!¹⁷⁹ Given this level of exposure, it is no wonder, as Grossberg remarks, that some of our most memorable moments are inextricably bound up with the media: the 1963 assassination and funeral of President Kennedy, the urban riots of 1964-5, the Watergate hearings of 1973-4, and, for younger viewers, the 1986 Challenger disaster, the Gulf War in 1991, the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995 and Princess Diana's funeral in 1997, to name but a few¹⁸⁰.

¹⁷⁴ See Grant McCracken, "Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods", *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 13, no. 1 (June 1986), 75.

¹⁷⁵ Michael R. Real, *Super Media: A Cultural Studies Approach* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1989), 13.

¹⁷⁶ Todd Gitlin, ed., *Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture* (US: Pantheon Books, 1986), 3.

¹⁷⁷ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (GB: Fontana, 1974), 29.

¹⁷⁸ The number of households owning a television set rose from 8,000 in 1946, to 4 million in 1950, to 46 million in 1960 (a 920% increase!), to 61 million in 1970, Norton et al. 943.

¹⁷⁹ Godfrey J. Ellis, "Television and the Family: An Emerging Idea", *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 4, no. 2 (June 1983), 276.

¹⁸⁰ Lawrence Grossberg et al., *Media Making: Mass Media in a Popular Culture* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1998), 3.

Of course the problem with all of these statistics testifying to its popularity is that television tends to be scapegoated for every possible thing wrong or lacking in contemporary society. Kruger offers a particularly interesting and colourful description of this vision of television as an omnipotent, manipulating social presence: 'Like a mad scientist of global proportions, it elects presidents, conducts diplomacy, and creates consensus: a consensus of demi-alert nappers caught half-way between the vigilance of consciousness and the fascinated numbness of stupor'¹⁸¹. Much is made of the apparent ability of television to enter into the minds of its audience, anxiety possibly stemming from a prediction made by McLuhan in 1951 that: 'The ad agencies and Hollywood...are always trying to get inside the public mind in order to impose their collective dreams upon that inner stage'¹⁸². There is no doubt that television is an effective way of getting a message across to a large audience. In fact the similarities between the strategies employed by television and by advertizing in general are numerous and have led to television being described by one critic as: 'Undoubtedly the greatest selling medium ever devised'¹⁸³. The great coup performed by television is, of course, that the viewers are rarely aware of their own status within its manipulation, a situation which is ironic considering that many viewers become completely dependent on television to create their identities and give their lives a sense of meaning. This is illustrated in the common perception that life is significant only if it is validated by television, a mindset noted by Baudrillard: 'Without this circular hookup...without this perpetual video, nothing has any meaning today' (*America*, 37); and demonstrated by many of the characters I will be examining below. The Gladney family and their community, in DeLillo's *White Noise*, for example, are devastated when their evacuation during the Airborne Toxic Event goes unreported by the media: 'There's nothing on network....Not a word, not a picture....What exactly has to happen before they stick microphones in our faces and hound us to the doorsteps of our homes,

¹⁸¹ Barbara Kruger, *Remote Control: Power, Cultures, and the World of Appearances* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993), 49.

¹⁸² Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1967), 97.

¹⁸³ Martin Meyer quoted in Drummond and Paterson, eds., *Television in Transition*, 38.

camping out on our lawns, creating the usual media circus? Haven't we earned the right to despise their idiot questions?' (161-2). Their anger clearly stems from a presumption that events need media validation in order to be significant.

Television is also associated with many of the more debilitating aspects of postmodern culture. The saturation of the world with images and information by the media is often cited as the main reason the individual has become paralyzed and meaning itself has been undermined. Borges' story "The Library of Babel", in which all the information in the world is contained in the library but is inaccessible because of the infinite number of books in which it is held, is often cited as a metaphor for the current situation¹⁸⁴. Television is also accused of undermining traditional family bonds by wielding much more influence over the child than any parent possibly can, its many roles including: 'Third parent, second teacher, entertainer, informer.... babysitter....'¹⁸⁵. Its presentation of all information, whether past or current, in an immediate, urgent manner is said to have the effect of collapsing differences of time and space, thus resulting in what McLuhan calls a 'global village', in which everything that happens effects all of its inhabitants simultaneously¹⁸⁶. Finally, it is viewed as encouraging the widespread blurring of genres which is generally hailed as one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism, for it juxtaposes news, children's shows, advertizements and music videos so that they become indistinguishable from one another. Ellis' students comment on the impossibility of differentiating between music videos and advertizements: 'The video ends and another one comes on, but it's not a video, it's a commercial for soap' (*The Rules of Attraction*, 168); and television news is described in similar terms by another observer: 'Both journalism and show business, a key political institution as well as a seller of detergent and breakfast cereal'¹⁸⁷. Examples of these and many other related phenomena pervade contemporary fiction

¹⁸⁴ See Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, 168. Also Douglas Kellner, ed., *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 194.

¹⁸⁵ Edward L. Palmer et al., "The Television Family and Children's Fright Reactions", *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 4, no. 2 (June 1983), 279.

¹⁸⁶ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (GB: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967), 63.

¹⁸⁷ Daniel C. Hallin, "We Keep America on Top of the World". From Gitlin, ed., 11.

and will be discussed in detail in later chapters. In the next section of this chapter, however, I would like to focus on the issue of manipulation, looking in particular at the question of who exactly who is doing the manipulating, and who in turn is being manipulated where television is concerned.

It is, of course, impossible to separate television from the corporations who invest so much money in it for it is an expensive medium to run – so much so that independent channels are a rarity. The recent merger of Time Warner and aol.com¹⁸⁸ is but one example of the way in which a few large corporations control much of the electronic media. The result of this trend is that television is generally presumed to reinforce the conservative values of the dominant culture. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was the Gulf War to which many theorists refer as a media spectacle. The footage transmitted from the Middle East by television for public consumption clearly indicates the role played by the dominant media in the process of legitimating the views and values of the country's most powerful social groups for, as Michaud points out, the mainstream mass media adopted, supported and reinforced the discourse of the political leadership of the US and its military spokespeople, while ignoring or at least marginalizing opposition voices. So effective were the media in their valorization of the government's stand against Saddam Hussein that President Bush's speech broadcast live on the eve of the war became the single most watched event in America's televised history¹⁸⁹. Of course the manipulation by the President and his co-leaders is but one aspect of the use of television at the time of the Gulf War. In fact many theorists go so far as to suggest that the whole campaign was structured to fit in with television's schedule of peak viewing figures. It has been alleged that the bombing missions were set to coincide with the evening news and even that footage was doctored so that the 'smart' bombs, which in reality usually missed, were seen hitting their targets with 'surgical' precision¹⁹⁰. It is thus that the realms of war and entertainment, reality and illusion became indistinguishable.

¹⁸⁸ See Jackie Bourke, "Marriage of Convenience", *The Irish Times* (Wednesday, 9 February, 2000), 10.

¹⁸⁹ Gene Michaud, "US Television and the Gulf Conflict", From Michael Klein, *An American Half Century: Postwar Culture and Politics in the USA* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), 275, 280.

¹⁹⁰ See Kellner, *Baudrillard*, 55.

The Gulf war is, of course, by no means the only example of the use of television by politicians as a means of manipulating the voters. President Kennedy displayed a great awareness of the power of the media and was even dubbed 'the first television President' by McLuhan because he was the first American politician to understand: 'The dynamics and lines of force of the television iconoscope'¹⁹¹. It is, however, only since 1968 that television has been used extensively during the run-up to the Presidential election¹⁹². By 1992, the media, according to Rushkoff, emerged as more than a mere conduit for the candidates' expression: they became an active partner in the campaign¹⁹³. The importance of the role played by television is revealed by the fact that it is generally agreed that one of the main reasons George Bush lost this election was because Clinton could respond better to the demands of the interactive media marketplace. The latter's decision to appear on MTV to answer questions from young people is said to have done more than any of his ideas or policies to elect him¹⁹⁴.

Even Clinton's manipulation of the media, however, pales in comparison with that of Reagan, who emerged from his movie career to become one of the most popular American presidents of all time. Reagan's main advantage, according to one contemporary journalist, was that he recognized the power of the media and understood exactly how to utilize it: 'A superb political actor who has conveyed exactly what the American psyche needs in the role of the President, reassurance....We didn't really elect him but fell in love with him....Nothing broke the spell'¹⁹⁵. The spell was, of course, broken to some degree by Reagan's implication in the Iran-Contra scandal which surfaced in 1986 and concerned the sale of weapons to Iran by members of the President's own security department. One of the most fascinating aspects about the scandal was the demonstration by one of the accused, Oliver North, of exactly how a

¹⁹¹ *Playboy* Interview. Quoted in McLuhan and Zingrone, eds., *The Essential McLuhan*, 235.

¹⁹² Ralph Lee Smith, *The Wired Nation: Cable Television – The Electronic Communications Highway* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1972), 21.

¹⁹³ Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus!: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 67.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 161.

¹⁹⁵ James Reston. Quoted in David Thelen, *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 27.

favourable television appearance can completely change the public's perception of events. Although indirectly to blame for the deaths of two-hundred-and-sixty-nine US Marines killed at Beirut airport by the Ayatollah (to whom North had sold weapons), North's televised testimony transformed him into a national hero and earned him an approval rating of ninety-six percent¹⁹⁶. 'Olliemania' became the official name for this period of madness in which North played his starring role to perfection, a performance widely praised by a number of observers. An article in one contemporary newspaper declared: 'He's Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*;....He's Lt. Colonel Oliver North in *The Iran-Contra Affair*'¹⁹⁷. The debt he owed to his favourable portrayal by the media can perhaps be compared to Clinton's, for the latter's charisma and ease in front of the camera were certainly part of the reason he was saved from impeachment after revelations about his sex life were leaked by means of another component of the electronic media, the tape-recorder. These examples provide irrefutable evidence that the mass media, television in particular, play an important role in the making or breaking of a public image or career.

Although the discussion above may appear to imply that the mass media are the willing slaves of those able to manipulate them, there is some evidence that those who appear to be controlling the airwaves are themselves but pawns of the media. Far from representing a figure of supreme authority, the President is likened by many theorists to an empty cipher. McLuhan, for example, declares: 'The President of the United States is necessarily a scriptwriter, cued in by a hundred experts. He has no satisfaction from involvement in the decision-making process. He is an image'¹⁹⁸. The possibility that the media might be used to further one's cause is also undermined by Baudrillard who insists, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, that the media are not coefficients, but rather effectors of ideology (169). In other words, the media do not cooperate in the production and transmission of another's ideology, but work rather to impose their own. One example given by Baudrillard is the capacity of the media to

¹⁹⁶ Thompson. 266-8.

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Thelen. 34.

¹⁹⁸ *The Marshall McLuhan Dew-Line Newsletter*, vol. I, no. iv (June 1969).

neutralize dissent simply by representing it: ‘Transgression and subversion never “get on air” without being subtly negated as they are: transformed into models, neutralized into signs, they are eviscerated of their meaning’. It is useless, therefore, according to Baudrillard, to fantasize about state projection of police control through television for: ‘Television, by virtue of its mere presence, is a social control in itself’. Its most powerful weapon is its ability to ensure that people, glued to their television sets, are no longer speaking to one another (172). This situation is reminiscent of Huxley’s prophecy in *Brave New World*¹⁹⁹ in which: ‘Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours’²⁰⁰. It also mirrors the theory behind Bentham’s famous prison, the Panopticon, in which the prisoners were controlled not through any physical means but through the knowledge that they were probably being watched at all times: ‘The more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of the establishment have been attained’²⁰¹. By welcoming television into their homes, therefore, people are voluntarily placing themselves under the control not of those who **appear** to be manipulating the content of the transmission, but of the anti-mediatory and repressive nature of the medium itself.

As well as the constant though imperceptible control detailed above, there have also been occasions where television has directly intervened in history and dramatically changed the course of events. Given that sixty million people regularly watched the evening news during the Vietnam War²⁰², for example, it is hardly surprising that television proved decisive in shaping the public reaction to the war. When CBS anchorman, Walter Cronkite, returned from Vietnam and declared that the US war was ‘mired in stalemate’, President Johnson – who, incidentally, kept three television sets in the Oval Office, one tuned to each network²⁰³ – is said to have turned to an aide and declared: ‘It’s all over’, for if he’d lost Walter Cronkite, he had lost ‘Mr. Average

¹⁹⁹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York and London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1977).

²⁰⁰ Quoted in Hal Crowther, “Clinging to the Rock: A Novelist’s Choices in the New Mediocracy”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 89, no. 2 (Spring 1990), 335.

²⁰¹ Jeremy Bentham, *Works*, vol. 4 (GB: Thoemmes Press, 1995), 40.

²⁰² Chafe, 346.

²⁰³ Newcomb, ed., 285.

Citizen'²⁰⁴. This intervention by Cronkite was not the only way in which public reaction towards the war was influenced, however, for the very fact that the war was televised proved fatal for its support. This, according to Meyrowitz, was for two main reasons: Firstly, television gave Americans an unprecedented view of the enemy. Whereas in newspaper and radio stories the words 'friend' and 'enemy' are quite distinct, on television both groups looked very much alike. This made it difficult to maintain a traditional 'them against us' attitude about the Vietnam War. Secondly, television revealed a disorganized and bloody view of fighting that was even more damaging to the war effort (136-7). After a significant amount of exposure to Vietnam on television, therefore, few people were satisfied with the way in which the war was unfolding. Television thus clearly played a significant role in President Johnson's decision to start pulling out of Vietnam from March 1968 onwards - just two months, incidentally, after Cronkite's famous broadcast. One final point of interest about this relationship between the media and the Vietnam war is that fictional representations of the war have since conferred a kind of quasi-victory on America, for if the physical bombardment of Vietnam failed, the electronic bombardment of the rest of the world was a resounding success. It is for this reason that Baudrillard claims the war was won by both sides - by the Vietnamese on the ground, by the Americans in the electronic space: 'If the one side won an ideological and political victory, the other made *Apocalypse Now* and that has gone right around the world' (*America*, 49). The Vietnam War is thus an excellent example of the many ways in which the media, television in particular, can influence the public response to events, both contemporaneously and retrospectively.

There is, of course, no doubt that the most significant example of this intrusion of television into the realm of history came in the form of the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963. The unique nature of the grief that gripped the country in its aftermath should not be attributed, according to Jameson, to the President's public position, for in fact his personal popularity and prestige were at a particularly low ebb at the time. Rather it is better grasped as a consequence of the 'coming of age' of the whole media culture: 'Suddenly, and for a brief moment (which lasted, however,

²⁰⁴ Engelhardt. 243.

several long days), television showed what it could really do and what it really meant – a prodigious new display of synchronicity and a communicational situation that amounted to a dialectical leap over anything hitherto suspected’ (*Postmodernism*, 355). The television networks stayed with post-assassination events from soon after the shooting to the end of the funeral – four days, Friday to Monday, without a single commercial, to which at times nine out of ten Americans were tuned²⁰⁵. The extraordinary thing about the assassination is the extent to which it remains in the public memory as a significant turning point in American history. This is expressed by Engelhardt who describes how viewers: ‘Seemed to sense that they were at some unexpected cutoff point, a possible unmarked exit into a storyless world’ (182); while DeLillo, who makes no secret of the effect the assassination had on himself personally, describes it as: ‘The seven seconds that broke the back of the American century’ (*Libra*, 181). As well as marking the beginning of a media-dominated society, the assassination is also sometimes hailed as ‘the first postmodern historical event’²⁰⁶, ushering in a period of confusion and chaos which is characterized, above all else, by the widespread obliteration of the boundaries between reality and representation.

One of the lasting consequences of the assassination and its overwhelming coverage by the mass media, as Boorstin illustrates, is that representation has come to be privileged over reality to the extent that people feel that it is only by looking at an event on television that it can really be understood: ‘The full flavour of the experience seemed to come only to the “viewer”, the man in the television audience....The man there in person was space-bound, crowd-confined; while the television viewer was free to see from all points of view, above the heads of others and behind the scenes. Was it he who was *really* there?’²⁰⁷ This blurring of reality and representation is mirrored in the widespread confusion about which of the multitude of accounts of the assassination are factual, and which fictional. These genres became mixed up to the extent that the

²⁰⁵ Engelhardt, 182.

²⁰⁶ Thomas Carmichael, “Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, *The Names* and *Mao II*”, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Spring 1993), 207.

²⁰⁷ *The Americans*, 390-3.

official Warren Commission report is generally regarded as fabricated evidence designed to clear the security forces of any blame, while Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* is granted the status of a well-researched investigation. Stone himself helped to muddy the water when he claimed that he was: 'Acting as an historian in retelling the story of Kennedy's death'²⁰⁸. There is indeed evidence that those too young to have 'witnessed' the assassination themselves generally believe in Stone's account²⁰⁹, a clear example of the privileging of representation over reality that characterizes the media-dominated world of the postmodern.

Although the assassination of President Kennedy is undoubtedly the most dramatic example of the role played by the media in the construction of history, its role in the assassination attempt on Reagan is more interesting and reveals the even greater extent to which the media had permeated the American psyche by the 1980's. The assassin, John Hinckley, admitted that his act was directly modeled on the character played by Robert DeNiro in *Taxi Driver*, a violent and emotionally unstable figure who plans to shoot a presidential candidate in order to win the admiration of a prostitute played by Jodie Foster. Hinckley's own motivation was eerily identical: by assassinating the president he was hoping to attract the attention of the real Jodie Foster. Bizarre though this is, the circumstances under which the attempted assassination took place are worthy of a movie script in their own right for it occurred on the very day of the scheduled Academy Awards ceremony, in which DeNiro went on to win the Best Actor award for his role as another character with a violent streak, Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. Ironically, the President, himself an ex-actor, had prepared a taped greeting to his friends in the movie industry and the public, which was to be broadcast during the very ceremony that would honour with its highest award the actor who inspired his assailant. Because of the assassination attempt, the ceremony was delayed by twenty-four hours, and Reagan's pre-recorded greeting was omitted since, as a direct

²⁰⁸ Glen Thomas. "History, Biography, and Narrative in Don DeLillo's *Libra*". *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 108.

²⁰⁹ Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (GB: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

result of a movie interpretation, he now lay recovering in a hospital²¹⁰. Whereas the assassination of President Kennedy became a media spectacle only after the event itself had occurred, therefore, society went on to become so dominated by the spectacle that twenty years later the attack on another President was both inspired by and modeled on a movie.

Whether regarded as a means by which the truth can be manipulated by those in power, or as a moulding force in itself, the effects of television as discussed above appear to be predominantly negative. Part of the problem, according to Morley, is that many media theorists buy into the 'pessimistic mass society thesis' elaborated by the Frankfurt School, which blamed the rise of fascism in Germany on the loosening of traditional ties and structures which then left people open and vulnerable to the propaganda of powerful leaders²¹¹. The most effective agency for the transmission of this propaganda was, of course, the mass media. Goebbels, Hitler's minister for propaganda, made widespread use of the radio and is said to have been investigating television as a possible means of further brainwashing the masses²¹². Baudrillard's analysis of the media, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, concludes that they make the audience passive and isolated, prevented from communicating with one another: 'Media is always what prevents response, making all processes of exchange impossible' (170). The media's 'crowning achievement', he claims, lies in their ability to fool the public into believing that they too play an important role in the production of the spectacle. The referendum, the opinion poll and the call-in radio or television show, in which the answer is always implied in the question thus preventing the expression of any real opinion, are all examples of this apparent interaction with the audience (171). Of course, the fact that the participants in these surveys are generally limited to choosing between preset options is reminiscent of the illusion of choice offered to the consumer by the marketplace, a phenomenon which was examined in detail earlier in the chapter. The only real alternative available to the audience,

²¹⁰ Real. 43, 59, 61.

²¹¹ David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 45.

²¹² Williams, *Television*, 24.

according to Baudrillard, is the questionable strategy of dropping out of society altogether: 'They (the masses) turn themselves into an impenetrable and meaningless surface, which is a method of disappearing' (*Selected Writings*, 213). Baudrillard's analysis of the mass media is questioned by many critics. Philo insists that the audience will always impose their own perspective or bias on what they see, with the result that it is always the audience and not the media themselves who impose the final interpretation on the message²¹³. The obvious problem with this theory is, of course, that the media can foreground one dominant opinion or reading of a situation to the exclusion of all others. Nevertheless, public opinion continues to play a part in the production of meaning in contemporary society. I mentioned above that it was the public's dissatisfaction with the way the Vietnam War appeared to be going – dissatisfaction based on footage shown by the mainstream network channels – that turned the tide of opinion against continued US involvement. I also discussed the valorization of Oliver North as a patriot after his performance during his televised trial in 1987. Although this might appear to support the supremacy of the media in their manipulation of public opinion, it is important to point out that the Iran-Contra hearings awoke many viewers out of their passivity and engaged them in public debates and letter-writing campaigns, both in support and in condemnation of North²¹⁴. In spite of Baudrillard's claim that the media are fundamentally anti-mediatory and promote only isolation among their audience, therefore, it is clear that the viewers can and sometimes do respond to the stories they see unfolding.

The public debate that raged during North's trial is but one example of how, contrary to the claims made by theorists such as Baudrillard that the media isolate people from each other, controversial media stories can sometimes bring people together by providing them with a common subject of interest. Some of the theorists involved with the study of the family in postmodern society have also concluded that, rather than being at the root of its downfall as is sometimes claimed, television can

²¹³ Greg Philo. *Seeing and Believing: The Influence of Television* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 177.

²¹⁴ Thelen, 45ff.

provide a useful framework within which family members can discuss their problems or worries²¹⁵. Parents watching television with their children, for example, can use a situation portrayed on television as a possible model for the behaviour of people in real life, in particular of the family members themselves. Sam Hughes and her family, in Mason's *In Country*, use television footage of the Vietnam War, as well as *M*A*S*H*, a fictional account of life among the American medical corps during the Korean war, to attempt to relate to what they believe her father may have experienced in Vietnam. It was, in fact, the death of one of the characters in the latter that first brought the reality of her father's death home to Sam: 'Years ago, when Colonel Blake was killed, Sam was so shocked she went around stunned for days. She was only a child then, and his death on the program was more real to her than the death of her own father.... Each time she saw that episode, it grew clearer that her father had been killed in a war'²¹⁶. The latter example is particularly interesting because *M*A*S*H* was a hugely popular television show which represented a common source of interest for many Americans. The final two-and-a-half-hour episode, for example, was watched by over two million Americans and Canadians²¹⁷ - including the characters in *In Country*: 'Sam remembered the time last year when they, along with most of the country, had watched the final episode of *M*A*S*H*. Irene had made a double popping of popcorn in advance.... Emmett was choked up the whole last half hour' (107). What was significant about this transmission was that, like Mason's characters, people tended to gather together to watch it, thus transforming what was usually a solitary experience into a shared one. When the show ended, some thousands of people reportedly got together in more or less spontaneous '*M*A*S*H* parties', many of them dressing up as the character with whom they most closely identified. The discovery that they shared a common love for the series with so many strangers was what lay at the root of what Desaulniers calls: 'An intense expression of the phenomenon of communication and

²¹⁵ See Gene H. Brody and Zolinda Stoneman. "The Influence of Television Viewing on Family Interactions: A Contextualized Framework". *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 4, no. 2 (June 1983), 329.

²¹⁶ Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (London: Flamingo, 1987), 25.

²¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Desaulniers. "Television and Nationalism: From Culture to Communication". From Drummond and Paterson, eds., *Television in Transition*, 112.

identification'²¹⁸. This kind of community spirit is also fostered by certain media spectacles, such as important sports events, state occasions and even television award ceremonies. The Super Bowl, for example, represents the combination of media and live sports which some critics believe generates an almost religious fervour among its viewers: 'The Super Bowl...is best explained as a contemporary form of mythic spectacle'²¹⁹. Similarly, world-wide events, such as charity concerts, can also inspire feelings of solidarity and community: 'Televised rock music spectacles such as Band Aid...may also invoke a more direct sense of emotional solidarity which may reawaken and reinforce moral concerns such as the sense of common humanity...human rights....'²²⁰. Although watching television and assimilating its messages is usually something one does on one's own, therefore, occasionally an event or spectacle does manage to unite people into a kind of community of viewers if only for a brief time.

Of all the theorists who examine the role played by the media in contemporary society Douglas Rushkoff, acclaimed by one reviewer as: 'The brilliant heir to Marshall McLuhan'²²¹, is probably the most optimistic about its effects on humanity. Rushkoff's optimism is based on his conviction that although the media may originally have been established by the giants of industry in the hope that they could thereby manipulate the public and 'develop a consumer mindset in our population', this strategy has ultimately backfired because continuing developments in all aspects of the media have empowered, rather than paralyzed, the individual. Although he agrees that footage can indeed be manipulated – the Rodney King tapes, for example, have been used to prove both the innocence and guilt of the policemen involved – he claims that the instantaneous quality of today's media means that much of what is transmitted is relatively pure and uncensored²²². What theorists such as McLuhan failed to foresee, he insists, was that technology has become so complex that it no longer adheres to any kind of linear or hierarchical structure. The old style of television viewing involved

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Michael R. Real. "The Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle". From Newcomb, ed., 207.

²²⁰ Mike Featherstone. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1991), 121-2.

²²¹ *New Perspectives Quarterly*. Quoted on the back cover of Rushkoff. *Media Virus*.

²²² *Media Virus*, 5, 26, xii.

selecting a channel and passively watching whatever program was on, with the result that: 'We were a captive audience, relatively unable or at least uninspired to make choices while we watched'. With the invention of the remote control, however, the linear form of programs can be obstructed by the viewer who now has the means to 'surf' his/her way through the channels, deconstructing the messages and avoiding the advertizements (*Children of Chaos*, 39-40). Control of information has thus been returned to the viewer, who is yet further empowered by other recent technological developments such as the Internet.

Rushkoff's theories are certainly compelling and his faith in the liberating possibilities inherent in the media is heartening. Nevertheless, his optimism occasionally serves to cover up some fundamental flaws in his argument. Notwithstanding the fact that the image of an individual liberating him/herself from the repressive linear narrative of television scheduling with the sole aid of a remote control is pathetic rather than empowering, there is one basic problem with this premise: this ability to change channels is reminiscent of the illusion of choice offered to the consumer by the marketplace as was discussed above. Rushkoff's television viewer may be able to choose what to watch, but only if what he/she chooses is among the programs being broadcast at the time. There is no suggestion that an alternative – that the viewer might perhaps use the remote control to turn the television off – is available. Rushkoff's faith in the liberatory potential of the Internet is also, I believe, misguided. Certainly the Internet is a valuable source of information from a wide range of sources, both official and independent. The problem is that the wealth of information contained is so overwhelming that Baudrillard's prophecy that where there is 'more and more information' there will be 'less and less meaning' is a distinct reality (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 6). This is a theme broached by Pynchon at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* where Byron the Bulb, who is part of the national grid (an obvious metaphor for a computer network), prophesizes that: 'Someday he will know everything and be as impotent as before' (654). The implication is obvious: in spite of the vast new sources of information available due to recent technological developments, the lack of a structure or framework by which to navigate this information means that it rarely fulfils

its potential. It appears that where the mass media are concerned the individual is stuck between two extremes: too much control by the media and information becomes useless propaganda, too little and it cannot be assimilated.

Television is undoubtedly the most important component of the mass media forces that play such a central role in the construction of the contemporary world, for its popularity and relative affordability means that it is available to almost all social groups. This final section of the introduction has provided a detailed analysis of its characteristics, paying particular attention to the way in which it shapes public opinions and perspectives. Television is not the only component of the mass media that will be discussed in the course of this thesis, however. In spite of the vast decline in cinema attendances with the emergence of television – the sixty million people who attended the cinema per week in 1950 had fallen dramatically to forty million in 1960²²³ – movies continue to constitute a significant social force in many of the novels I will be examining, particularly those written by Pynchon and DeLillo. Other new media phenomena such as MTV and technologies such as the Internet also provide the young characters who populate the novels of Ellis and Coupland with many of their everyday experiences and the means by which they structure their world. These too will be examined in more detail in later chapters. The conclusion that must be drawn from an investigation of all of these texts is that the mass media, along with consumerism, constitute both the dominant ethos of the environment portrayed and the primary means through which the characters interact with each other and with the external world.

One final point that remains to be made before beginning my analysis of the fiction of the four authors is that although the issues discussed above are relevant to much of contemporary American society – certainly the statistics cited during this introduction regarding the growth of consumerism and the mass media were based on surveys conducted on a nationwide basis – the novels I will be examining focus on a very particular group of people from a specific kind of background. The novels are primarily located either in New York (DeLillo and Ellis) or in Southern California

²²³ Norton et al. 944.

(Pynchon, Ellis and Coupland). It would appear that recent developments in consumerism, the mass media and technology, as well as the mind-set associated with postmodern theory, have had the greatest impact in these two large metropolitan centres, located on either coast of the American continent. Indeed so prevalent is their mutual devotion to the image or spectacle that it appears to eclipse, and even collapse, many of the traditional differences that were said to exist between the two locations. Anderson claims, for example, that: 'The main line of mutual contempt that used to flow between the coasts – New York versus L.A. – mostly devolved into Woody Allen and Johnny Carson punch lines.... People in New York and L.A. fuss hysterically over nuances of style and status that would be invisible elsewhere'²²⁴. This is an opinion shared by many observers. New York, for Brooker, represents a kind of: 'Global *musée imaginaire*, a collective dream'²²⁵; while Baudrillard describes the city as a kind of ongoing movie in which the inhabitants themselves star: 'With the marvelous complicity of its entire population, New York acts out its own catastrophe as a stage play' (*America*, 22). It is the dislocation caused by the apparent superficiality of this experience that makes New York the 'terminal of fear', whose 'casual savagery' and 'fatal beauty'²²⁶ is so well depicted in the novels of DeLillo and Ellis. Southern California is usually viewed as taking these trends to extremes, and is described variously as a product of consumerism: 'L.A., it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1988, a *commodity*; something to be advertized and sold to the people of the U.S, like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash'²²⁷; and of the mass media: 'L.A. is probably the most mediated town in America, nearly unviewable save through the fictive scrim of its mythologizers'²²⁸. My focus on these two locations during the course of this thesis will thus be on the dominant role played by the forces of consumerism and the mass media in the structuring of the lives

²²⁴ Kurt Anderson, *Turn of the Century* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2000), 375.

²²⁵ Brooker, 1.

²²⁶ Daniel Aaron, "How to Read Don DeLillo", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 89, no. 2 (Spring 1990), 309.

²²⁷ Joan Didion. Quoted in Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Vintage, 1990), 17.

²²⁸ M. Sorkin. Quoted in Davis, *City of Quartz*, 20.

and experiences of their inhabitants - and, by corollary, of the fictional characters I will be discussing.

The phenomena and characteristics discussed in the course of this introductory chapter are the focus of many recent works both of theory and of fiction. It is my contention, however, that the four authors who constitute the focus of my thesis contribute in unparalleled ways to the current debate. Although they share many of the same assumptions and anxieties about the nature of the contemporary world, they each approach their examination of its dominant characteristics from different angles, thus offering a wide perspective. Two of the authors, Pynchon and DeLillo, have been publishing since the 1960's and 1970's respectively, while Ellis and Coupland's novels date only from the mid-1980's and early 1990's. I believe that the two generations of writers complement each other very well because the novels of Pynchon and DeLillo highlight many of the trends and phenomena that first manifested themselves in the 1960's and 1970's, and became increasingly prevalent towards the end of the century, as evidenced by their overwhelming representation in the fiction of Ellis and Coupland. Many of these trends, including the emergence of consumerism and the mass media as dominant social forces, as well as the various developments associated with postmodern theory, have been examined already in the course of this introduction. I do not wish to imply, however, that the novels of Pynchon and DeLillo are useful only because they provide a background for the discussion of these contemporary phenomena. On the contrary, both authors have continued to reassess their positions in regard to the present world, culminating in the end-of-century publication of two retrospectives, Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* and DeLillo's *Underworld*, which delve into the American past in order to find some clues that might help their characters to understand – and survive in – the present. Indeed the fact that all four of the authors have published within the last three years (Coupland as recently as April 2000) means that their novels offer an informed and up-to-date analysis of contemporary life, and this is what makes them particularly relevant to the present discussion.

Chapter 1: Thomas Pynchon.

‘Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas any more’ – *The Wizard of Oz*.

In the novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Up To Me*, by Thomas Pynchon’s great friend and classmate Richard Farina, the main protagonist is handed a card. On one side, written in indelible purple ink, is the message: ‘The statement on the other side is false’; on the other, the message: ‘The statement on the other side is true’¹. The card thus represents a closed system, like Heller’s ‘Catch-22’, from which there is neither satisfaction nor escape. The dilemma faced by Gnossos is one with which Pynchon’s characters constantly grapple, for their world is also a closed system constructed out of different narratives, symbols and ciphers, where meaning is no longer guaranteed and communication has become impossible because society has become so saturated with messages that none reach their intended recipients without having been corrupted out of all recognition. This chapter will examine the world in which Pynchon situates his novels, paying particular attention to the issues of control and subversion that characterize it. In the first half of the chapter, I will discuss the forces present in society that wield such influence over the lives of Pynchon’s characters: forces including consumerism, the mass media and technology. The second half of the chapter will investigate the strategies employed by the characters in order to help them survive in such a world. I will show how they use language and the narratives of religion and science in order to structure the surrounding chaos for themselves. My focus throughout will be on the progression of the characters into states of fragmentation, alienation and inertia which Pynchon believes comprise the dominant characteristics of contemporary human life, and I will conclude by suggesting how such a progress might be halted and even reversed.

If contemporary America is, as I discussed in my introduction, defined to a large degree by the spirit of consumerism, it is appropriate that the sight that greets the

¹Richard Farina, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1996), 196.

protagonists of Pynchon's most recent novel *Mason and Dixon* when they first arrive in America over two centuries ago is also that of a market set up on the docks in which: 'All the debris of global Traffick, shreds of spices and teas and coffee-berries, splashes of Geneva gin'² are for sale. The advice given to the surveyors by two of the founding fathers of modern America, Benjamin Franklin and Charles Washington, is also based on the politics of the marketplace: Franklin warns them: 'Never pay the Retail Price' (267), while Washington encourages them to invest in real-estate (276). This could perhaps be interpreted as a forewarning that the Presidency itself would also become the preserve of those best able to sell themselves to the nation through the channels of the mass-media, like Ronald Reagan, the ex-actor, who rules (or misrules) the country in *Vineland*. Although most, if not all, of Pynchon's characters are susceptible to the forces of consumerism that surround them, one family, the Slothropes of *Gravity's Rainbow* – who are based, incidentally, on Pynchon's own ancestors – are particularly tied to the economics of America. The family's timber business serves as an appropriate metaphor for the central components of American society, for it converts trees into paper which is then further converted into toilet-paper, banknote stock and newspaper print, or what Tyrone Slothrop calls 'the three American truths': 'Shit, money, and the Word' (28). Using this statement as a framework, the first section of this chapter will discuss consumerism in terms of the power it brings to those who control it ('money'), the waste it generates through both its unusable bi-products and those sections of society against which it discriminates ('shit'), and the transcendent value instilled in commodities by people with very little else to believe in ('the Word').

Pynchon's novels are filled with examples of plots and conspiracies – both real and imaginary – which manifest themselves as forces manipulating the characters. The single most persistent and widespread conspiracy in both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* involves a number of industrial cartels. The area of Southern California in which Oedipa finds herself, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, seems to be entirely owned by Yoyodyne, Inc., of which her ex-husband, Pierce Inverarity, was a director: 'What the hell didn't he own?' (25). *Gravity's Rainbow* similarly seems to attribute the

² Thomas Pynchon, *Mason and Dixon* (UK: Jonathon Cape, 1997), 259.

entire course of the twentieth century to the machinations of another cartel, I.G. Farben. Pynchon's characters believe that even World War II, which provides the background in the novel, is a consequence not of politics which is: 'All theatre, all just to keep the people distracted', but has been dictated by the 'needs of technology' which thrive on the opportunities for expansion and experimentation provided by war (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 521). Indeed, relationships of buying and selling in *Gravity's Rainbow* are often seen to override any loyalty to one's country in times of crisis. Worries about the creation of stockpiles of tungsten filaments, which would lead to decreased profits are the basis for an agreement between the American General Electric and the German Krupp to set price guidelines, a move which directly governed the production of machine tools, and thus all areas of light and heavy industry. Any murmurs of disapproval about the arrangement were discounted: 'When the War came, some people thought it unpatriotic of General Electric to have given Germany an edge like that. But nobody with any power. Don't worry' (654)³. Having thus established that the forces of the marketplace dominate the world in which Pynchon's novels are set, I will now examine the two most important industrial cartels that control the lives of his characters: I.G. Farben and its fictional manifestation, Yoyodyne, Inc.

Josiah E. Dubois, a member of the American prosecution team who built the case for war-crimes against I. G. Farben, describes the history of the cartel as: 'The story of twenty-four geniuses who changed the face of the earth'⁴. Certainly, the importance of the role played by I.G. Farben in Germany's war effort cannot be exaggerated. Richard Sasuly, who was Chief of Financial Intelligence and liaison of the Finance Division of the U.S. Military Government at the time, insists that without the I.G., Hitler could never have gone to war⁵, for not only did I.G. Farben create massive shortages of vital army supplies among the Allies – 80% of all magnesium products in the Western hemisphere were controlled by its subsidiaries in the various countries –

³ This is similar to the scenario in *Catch-22*, in which Milo Minderbinder defends German membership in his syndicate by pointing to the huge profit he is making: 'Maybe they did start the war, and maybe they are killing millions of people, but they pay their bills a lot more promptly than some allies of ours I could name' (326).

⁴ Josiah E. Dubois, Jr., *Generals in Grey Suits* (London: The Bodley Head, 1953), 3.

⁵ Richard Sasuly, *I.G. Farben* (New York: Boni and Gaer, 1947), 14.

but through its invention of buna rubber it also transformed Germany in less than four years from a country that imported 95% of all its rubber to one that imported only 7%⁶. Besides its obvious influence on Hitler's foreign policy, I.G. Farben also played an important role in his domestic decisions, particularly in regard to the massacre of the Jews. Sasuly likens the cartel to: 'The engine that drove the Nazi war machine along the road to Buchenwald' (14). Not only did I.G. Farben locate its third largest buna rubber factory in Auschwitz and employ vast numbers of concentration camp inmates⁷, but it also had a world monopoly on the sale of Zyklon B, known all over the world as insecticide but also used to exterminate multitudes of prisoners in Auschwitz. It is a testament to the power of the cartel that despite the incriminating evidence brought to light by investigators, such as Dubois and Sasuly, of the twenty-three defendants tried at Nuremberg in 1947, ten were acquitted and the remainder served short sentences on the sole charge of 'plundering'⁸.

I.G. Farben is very much a force in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where most of the characters seem – either consciously or unconsciously – to be controlled by it. Slothrop discovers that he was sold as a child to the cartel by his parents for experimental purposes (286). Besides constituting one of the central themes of the novel, Slothrop's betrayal is symbolic, according to Carter, of the collaboration which occurred between American industrialists and I.G. Farben during the 1930's and 1940's, often with disastrous results for American soldiers (Slothrop is, of course, himself a soldier)⁹. As well as its physical presence in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the control enjoyed by I.G. Farben also manifests itself through its fictional representation Yoyodyne, Inc. We first come in contact with this company in *V*, where it begins life as the Chiclitz Toy Company, based in New Jersey (227). The company became extremely successful when it cornered the

⁶ Dubois, 80, 154.

⁷ By 1941, I.G. Farben was using 10,000 slaves in its factories. In 1942, slave employment rose to 22,000; in 1943, to 58,000; and by 1945, to well over 100,000. Dubois also reminds us that given the brutal conditions in the concentration camps the turnover of labourers would have been huge (50).

⁸ Interestingly, I.G. Farben are still involved in legal proceedings with some of their former labourers and their families. See Denis Staunton, "Holocaust Survivors Protest at I.G. Farben Meeting", *The Irish Times* (Thursday, 19 August, 1999), 9.

⁹ John C. Carter, "Pynchon's Transmarginal Leaps". Edinburgh University: Unpublished M.Litt. Thesis, 1987, 150.

market for yoyos, which were in demand both as children's toys and as an important component of a military instrument, the gyrocompass. The basis of its success is reflected in its new name, **Yoyodyne**, Inc. (227). The company re-emerges in *The Crying of Lot 49* as a considerable controlling force, for what the inhabitants of San Narcisco have in common is not a shared ancestry or history, but rather a shared present as employees or subjects of the Galactronics Division of Yoyodyne, Inc., one of the giants of the aerospace industry and San Narcisco's biggest source of employment (15). Not only does Pierce Inverarity, former director of the company, appear to own everything in San Narcisco - including, it appears, Oedipa herself - but it becomes increasingly apparent that the mystery in which Oedipa - and by extension the reader - becomes embroiled could also be a creation of his, an elaborate hoax set up to demonstrate the power he wields even after his death: 'It's unavoidable, isn't it? Every access route to the Tristero could be traced also back to the Inverarity estate' (117). The action and characters of both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are thus firmly under the control of their respective cartels. The inevitable result of such a society which, as Levine says: 'Wrests control from humans and invests it in things'¹⁰, is that human beings are objectified and reduced to the status of commodities. Slothrop, for example, is bought, sold, and finally discarded by Jamf and I.G. Farben. Having established that 'Money', or those who own these powerful cartels, are indeed a significant presence in society, I will now examine the second of Slothrop's 'American truths' - 'Shit', or those who are used and then thrown out by these cartels.

Pynchon, as Tanner points out, is a writer with great sympathy for what society designates as 'rubbish'¹¹. His works are populated not only by examples of actual dumps and landfills, such as in "Low-lands", in which the protagonist, Flange, actually ends up moving in to live in a dump¹²; but also by many of the categories of people whom society regards as 'rubbish' or socially useless junk: 'Bums, homos, drifters, transients, itinerants'¹³. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, Oedipa manages to slip

¹⁰ George Levine, "V-2", *Partisan Review*, vol. 40, no. 3 (Fall 1973), 521.

¹¹ Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York and London: Methuen and Co., 1982), 20.

¹² Thomas Pynchon, "Low-lands", From *Slow Learner* (London: Vintage, 1995), 77.

¹³ Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, 20.

below the surface of official American society and discover a whole world of 'excluded middles' (125) she never knew existed. The consciousness that these categories are created and organized by particular market forces is one that pervades Pynchon's novels and is at the root of much of the paranoia and feelings of persecution displayed by his characters. Of course in the case of certain characters, Slothrop, for example, this paranoia is well justified for he is indeed a commodity controlled by I.G. Farben. His status as a piece of waste is emphasized, by the fact that our introduction to him takes the form of the layers of rubbish covering his desk: 'Slothrop's (desk) is a godawful mess. It hasn't been cleared down to the original wood surface since 1942....Made up of millions of tiny red and brown curls of eraser rubber, pencil shavings, dried tea or coffee stains' (18). The fact that the debris includes: 'lost pieces to different jigsaw puzzles' is an early indication that Slothrop will never get all the answers he is looking for.

Like DeLillo, whose novels I will be discussing in the next chapter, Pynchon is also interested in human waste, or 'shit' as Slothrop calls it. Both the main protagonists in *V* find themselves wandering about the sewers – Profane in order to finance his aimless yoyoing (122), and Stencil following another lead in his interminable search for information about V (131). Similarly, Slothrop disappears down through his toilet, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in a bid to find the harmonica he dropped in (64). One of the reasons that people (especially those in positions of authority) are so afraid of waste, according to Ames, is because of its indestructible fertility. Just as an obscenity, such as 'shit', is a symbol of rebellion against prescribed manners: 'An illocutionary act that violates a taboo of the official culture and in so doing silently acknowledges allegiance with the entire counterculture of the dispossessed'¹⁴, therefore, so too does Pynchon repeatedly locate any hope for an alternative to the official version of reality – now empty and barren – in those echelons of society normally confined to the margins. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, Oedipa discovers an alternative to the official means of communication in the appropriately named W.A.S.T.E. system, used by outcasts and

¹⁴ Christopher Ames. "Power and the Obscene World: Discourses of Extremity in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*". *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1990), 196-7.

dropouts from mainstream life: 'It survived today, in California, serving as a channel of communication for those of unorthodox sexual persuasion' (75); in *Gravity's Rainbow*, hope is located among the Hereros, black African troops based in Germany, who retain an element of spirituality so lacking in the majority of the other characters, as demonstrated in the subsumation of their dead into their daily lives; while, in *Vineland*, it is the hippies, like Zoyd Wheeler and his friends, who represent the last bastions of the innocence and purity of the pre-capitalist 1960's, to counteract, through their strong sense of family and community, the destructive power of Reagan's government troops. It would appear to be precisely because of their exclusion by mainstream culture that these undergrounds or 'waste' possess the potential to replenish society. Whether or not any of these alternatives could really take on the might of the forces of consumerism is unclear, however. Oedipa never finds out whether the W.A.S.T.E. system really exists or if it is merely a hoax set up by precisely one of those market forces, Pierce Inverarity: 'Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on?' (116); a substantial group among the Hereros, the 'Empty Ones', have embarked on a campaign of racial suicide which will indeed defy the colonial intentions of their German masters, but will also, of course, inevitably end all resistance to authority (317); and the hippies of Vineland, California, are gradually, through financial necessity, beginning to cut their hair and enter into the system: 'First thing new hires all found out was that their hair kept getting in the way of work. Some cut it short, some tied it back' (321). This idea that the idealism of the 1960's has been sacrificed to a corporate mentality frequently recurs throughout Pynchon's fiction and will be discussed at greater length later in the chapter. What all of these examples imply, therefore, is that the forces of consumerism are likely to continue unchecked in spite of the potential inherent in waste as a source of possible rebellion.

Of course, another reason the marketplace is set to continue as a powerful force in contemporary society is that we need it and its constructions to protect us from an external world which many suspect is nothing but a void. One particularly disturbing image in *The Crying of Lot 49* is that of Oedipa who wraps herself up in as many layers of clothes as she can in preparation for her sex-game with Metzger: '(Oedipa) began

putting on as much as she could of the clothing she'd brought with her: six pairs of panties in assorted colours, girdle, three pairs of nylons, three brassieres' (23). The message inherent in this image is two-fold, as Tanner points out, for Oedipa becomes both a grotesque parody of an insanely eclectic culture which 'over-dresses' itself with bits and pieces of fabrics and fabrications taken from anywhere; while simultaneously revealing a poignant vulnerability, for under the absurd, multi-layered 'protection', she is oddly defenceless, naked and exposed. Metzger does not fully undress her, but he does seduce her, a fact that proves the superficial nature of the protection offered by commodities (*Thomas Pynchon*, 58). In spite of this obvious failure, however, Pynchon's characters continue to instil commodities with religious significance, much in the same way as Jack Gladney and his wife Babette, in DeLillo's *White Noise*, who speak of 'the sense of well-being, the security and contentment' afforded to them by the sight of their car-load of purchases (20). Oedipa's immediate reaction after receiving the news of Inverarity's death, for example, is to go shopping (6). The supermarket is also where many of the characters feel closest to a sense of transcendence. Frenesi Gates, in *Vineland*, has a 'moment of undeniable clairvoyance' about the futility of her cocooned existence while wandering around her local store (90). As well as constituting an important controlling and shaping force on the lives of Pynchon's characters and the society in which they live, therefore, consumerism also fills the gap left in their lives by the widespread decline of spirituality.

One of the legends or myths of the contemporary consumerist society portrayed in *Vineland* is based on an event now known as 'the Great South Coast Plaza Eyeshadow Raid', an event which, we are assured, is still being talked about 'in tones of wounded bewilderment' at security seminars nationwide (327). The raid was comprized of a well-organized attack by 'two dozen girls, in black T-shirts and jeans' and wearing roller-blades, who swept into the Plaza shortly before closing, filled their bags with cosmetics and fashion accessories, which they then sold to a black-marketer parked near-by (328). Besides constituting an amusing anecdote in a style very reminiscent of DeLillo's *White Noise*, this passage provides a useful bridge between the previous section of this chapter on the force of consumerism and the next section which will

discuss the forces of the mass media, illustrating in particular the complicity between them. In their strike against the local stronghold of consumerism, the girls initially appear to be aided by the forces of the mass media. Prairie, for example, manages to save her friend Ché from a ‘mall cop’ in a manoeuvre she likens to being: ‘Bionically speeded-up, like Jayne Sommers’ (328), a reference of course to the popular television show, *The Bionic Woman*. However, the bravery of the rescue and the revolutionary connotations of her friend’s name are undercut by the mockery of the background music, whose ‘unthreatening wimped-out effluent’ both tranquilizes the other shoppers and illustrates that the shop itself could not really be damaged by the efforts of teenagers. The tune which is playing when the girls disperse with their spoils – ‘a sprightly oboe-and-string rendition of Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene”’ (328) – effortlessly subsumes their attack into the larger scheme of things, for the song’s title, also the brand name of the large American cosmetics company Maybelline, lets us know without any doubt that nothing can disturb the hold which the cooperating forces of consumerism and the mass-media have on society. The fact that Chuck Berry’s rock ‘n’ roll song has been reduced to its nemesis in the form of unthreatening, unrevolutionary musak is also significant because it refers, once more, to the fact that the spirit of rebellion which characterized the 1960’s had well and truly been quashed by the time Reagan was in power. With this in mind, the next section of this chapter will discuss the widespread influence first movies and then television has on Pynchon’s novels and their characters.

Pynchon himself is obviously both profoundly influenced by, and interested in, movies, for his work is pervaded both by references to specific movies and by stylistics generally associated with film¹⁵. According to McConnell, Pynchon reveals himself to be a ‘true child of his age’ through his affection for the 1939 classic *The Wizard of Oz*, references to which appear in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which Kansas is represented by the

¹⁵ There is some evidence that at the start of his career he considered taking a job as a film critic for *Esquire* magazine. David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 33.

relative normality of London and Oz by the mysterious underworld of the Zone¹⁶. References to movies in Pynchon generally fall into two categories: The first is one associated primarily with *Gravity's Rainbow*, where German movies predating 1946 are used to infuse the novel with a flavour of the time and to explore the cultural trends that may have influenced the explosion of fascism which resulted in World War II. The second category are American movies of the popular and commercial variety which, according to Clerc, are designed to satisfy the needs of a mass culture for sheer entertainment and escapism, and also reveal a certain yearning for the nostalgia of adolescent movie-going¹⁷. These appear most notably in *Vineland*, where their titles are italicized and include a release date: *The Return of the Jedi* (1983) (7), as if to give the impression that the novel is a kind of reference book for contemporary cinema. Pynchon uses these movies in a variety of ways: he incorporates cinematic techniques into his writing and the structure of his texts; he draws upon cinema as a source of images; he illustrates the power of cinema in shaping people's perceptions of themselves and their situations; and he uses the medium of film to dramatize his concerns regarding the widespread collapse of boundaries between reality and fiction. These topics will be addressed in the following section.

Pynchon's obvious interest in cinema reaches its climax in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Cowart has counted allusions to twenty-five movies, nine directors, and at least forty-eight actors in the novel (*Thomas Pynchon*, 33). The influence of cinema on Pynchon's novels does not end with its provision of this source of cultural references, however, for the texts are often based on filmic techniques. Wolfley points to the 'stylized square film projector sprocket holes' used to divide the chapters in *Gravity's Rainbow* as an indication that Pynchon's chosen artistic metaphor is the novel as movie¹⁸. The latter is also structured like a visit to the cinema: we begin and end the text as a cinema audience so that, in a sense, the narrative is the movie we are watching. Some scenes in

¹⁶ Quoted in "That Which Has Seemingly Influenced Thomas Pynchon".
<http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/bio/influences.html>

¹⁷ Charles Clerc, "Film in *Gravity's Rainbow*". From Charles Clerc, ed., *Approaches to "Gravity's Rainbow"* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983), 112-3.

¹⁸ Lawrence Wolfley, "Repression's Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon's Novel". From Richard Pearce, ed., *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1981), 99.

the novel are even written like a director's shooting script: 'After an hour (comic bassoon solos over close-ups of the old recreant guzzling some horrible fermented potato-mask lobotomy out of a jerrican, wiping her mouth on her sleeve, belching) of fruitless search, our modern-day pirates head out to sea again' (528). This technique is also used to great effect in *Vineland* where the dramatic hi-jacking of a passenger jet in mid-air occurs during Zoyd's performance on the piano of the main theme from the movie *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (65). Pynchon's interest in cinema is not limited to his thematic use of a number of movies, therefore, but also manifests itself in the style of his writing.

In his use of German movies of the pre-war period throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's main interest appears to be in the way they may or may not have influenced the mindset that allowed – and even encouraged – the rise of Nazism and its horrifying consequences. He is certainly influenced to some degree by Kracauer's extensive study of the cinema of the period, in which the author concludes that there were definite links between filmic themes and political trends: 'It is my contention that through an analysis of German film deep psychological dispositions prominent in Germany from 1918-33 can be exposed – dispositions which influenced the course of events during that time'¹⁹. Pynchon utilizes a number of the movies of Fritz Lang, a renowned German director of the period, to dramatize the problems with which his own characters are forced to grapple. He refers, for example, to *Der Mude Tod* ("Destiny", 1921) and *Metropolis* (1927), which illustrate the extent to which life is narrated by an omnipresent force from which there is no escape. As Stark points out, perhaps the most important question asked throughout Pynchon's work relates to authority: whether it is dangerous and resistance to it, therefore, not only justified but also obligatory; or whether it is benign and resistance to it merely a symptom of paranoia²⁰. This is a puzzle with which many of Pynchon's characters struggle, and like Lang's audience – and Hitler's subjects – many of them choose the reassuring, if repressive, presence of

¹⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (US: Princeton University Press, 1947), v.

²⁰ John O. Stark, *Pynchon's Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980), 135.

authority over the chaos and terror of the alternative structureless world.

The collapse of the distinctions between reality and fiction is another important issue for Pynchon, and film provides an ideal medium for him to explore both the possibilities and limitations of such a collapse. His novels are full of examples of what the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* calls the 'paracinematic': the impingement of film and life upon each other (388). Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is the propaganda movie made by Von Goll, a filmmaker closely modelled on Lang, which is designed to frighten the Germans with the 'information' that a black rocket troop, the Schwarzkommando, are present within their borders. When it transpires that this is in fact the case, Von Goll and his crew are convinced that the existence of the Schwarzkommando is somehow a consequence of the documentary made about them: 'It is widely believed that the Schwarzkommando have been summoned, in the way demons may be gathered in, called up to the light of day and earth by the now defunct Operation Black Wing' (275-6). Many of the characters also adopt the personal habits of famous movie stars. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pirate Prentice's grin is one he has copied: 'It is the exact mischievous Irish grin your Denis Morgan chap goes about' (32); while Slothrop, master of disguise, does an impersonation both of Cary Grant (292) and of Errol Flynn (381) among others. Similarly, in *Vineland*, Roscoe sees himself as: 'A sort of less voluble Tonto' (271); and Takeshi is referred to as: 'A Jap Robert Redford' (381). The problem with all of this is, of course, that the assumption of another's identity is generally a precursor to the loss of one's own. By adopting the characteristics of their favourite movie stars, therefore, Pynchon's characters may be empowering themselves temporarily, but they are simultaneously putting the integrity of their own identities at risk.

The seemingly close connection between life and the movies does appear to have some benefits, however. In *Vineland*, Prairie regains contact with her mother by watching archival footage: 'Until you get to see her....would you settle for watchin' her?' (194). Similarly, although her childhood was suffused with politics, Frenesi only achieves an understanding of the significance of her memories in the wider context of contemporary politics when she watches movies on the subject: 'Seeing older movies

on the Tube with her parents, making for the first time a connection between the far-off images and her real life' (81)²¹. Her mother's remark that: 'History...is no more worthy of respect than the average film script' (81) takes on a whole new significance when we take the movies of the period in the context of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, who targeted film-makers, actors and other artists as being the source of civil unrest and the evil of communism. Pynchon's use of film as a means of reclaiming the past also contains a warning, however, for as a medium film is shown to have its limitations. The credo of 24 fps, the guerrilla film crew in *Vineland*, which is based on a belief that the photographic image never lies, is revealed to be naïve and misleading because it presumes that the image could speak for itself, without mediation, and that it would speak truly, without distortion²². Moreover, as is revealed in *Gravity's Rainbow*, although a person's movements may be captured on film, the camera cannot read minds and so does not reveal its subject's inner thoughts and feelings: 'At the images she sees in the mirror, Katje also feels a cameraman's pleasure, but knows what he cannot: that inside herself, enclosed in the *soignée* surface of dear fabrics and dead cells, she is corruption and ashes' (94). The representation of life presented by film is thus seen to suffer from certain shortcomings, and the boundaries between reality and fiction, although perhaps not as clear as they were in the past, are nonetheless still present.

One area in which life is very much related to movies for many of Pynchon's characters is that of war. As Cowart points out, for those of us born since 1930 (Pynchon himself was born in 1937), World War II exists almost exclusively as a movie experience (*Thomas Pynchon*, 33). It is no wonder, therefore, that Oedipa's 'World War II' is cinematic: 'John Wayne on Saturday afternoon slaughtering 10,000 Japs with his teeth' (51). Simmon also reminds us that although *Gravity's Rainbow* is nominally concerned with World War II and its aftermath, Pynchon's real subject is the *theatre* of war, so that the actual war and the chaotic conditions it creates serves but as a backdrop

²¹ Frenesi's experience is echoed in Mason's *In Country*, in which Sam also gains an understanding of her heritage, the Vietnam War, by watching television: 'The reality of it didn't register on Sam until one day soon after they got their first colour TV set. She was eight or nine. On the evening news, a report from Vietnam' (51).

²² N. Katherine Hayles, '~ 'Who Was Saved?' Families, Snitches, and Recuperation in Pynchon's *Vineland*', *Critique*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Winter 1990), 83.

for the more personal dramas and dilemmas of the characters²³. Cowart points to the shared vocabulary – ‘Action’, for example, is common to both sound stage and battlefield – as one indication of the intrinsic similarities between war and filmmaking (*Thomas Pynchon*, 35). As well as providing a structure within which Pynchon can dramatize the events of his war, movies and weapons are also closely connected. The V-2, which reverses the relationship between cause and effect by not making any sound until after it has hit its target, owes its existence at least partly to techniques developed by filmmakers²⁴. Again Pynchon underlines that representation cannot fully portray the essence of an event by calling both films and calculus ‘pornographies of flight’ because: ‘They break up the actuality of movement into an illusion of movement without participation in the real experience itself’²⁵. This point is also made in *Vineland* where Frenesi’s decision to film Weed, the leader of the student revolution, in order to determine whether or not he has turned traitor: ‘Nail him with my Scopic, get up in his face with a radio mike, no mercy’ (236), is undermined by the introduction of a real gun into the equation: ‘Feel like we were running around like little kids with toy weapons, like the camera really was some sort of gun, gave us that kind of power. Shit. How could we lose track like that, about what was real?’ (259). Despite the shared vocabulary, therefore, these events in *Vineland*, like those discussed in relation to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, prove that ‘shooting’ a film and ‘shooting’ with a weapon are not the same thing at all, and that in this instance, at least, the barriers between reality and representation remain firmly in place.

At the very beginning of this section on movies, I made the point that one of the most important characteristics of film was the extent to which images have traditionally been manipulated in order to condition the audience to accept certain truths. This is underlined by the examples we are given throughout Pynchon’s novels of direct

²³ Scott Simmon. “Beyond the Theatre of War: *Gravity’s Rainbow* as Film”. From Pearce, ed., 124. Both Heller and West, who focus on the ridiculous preoccupation among commanding officers with the appearance of wartime troops and parades, are important antecedents for this idea of the ‘theatre of war’.

²⁴ The discovery that time could be slowed down by altering the speed of the frames on a film reel inspired scientists to use calculus in order to calculate rocket trajectories more accurately. Stark, 141.

²⁵ Quoted in Mark Richard Siegel. *Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in “Gravity’s Rainbow”* (New York: Kennikat Press Corp., 1978), 28.

government involvement in every aspect of the film industry. *Vineland*, for example, emphasizes the increasing extent to which Hollywood is coming under the control of politicians, through both violent means, in the case of the HUAC who blacklisted any artists thought to deviate even slightly from the official line; and more subtle, though equally effective, means, through Ronald Reagan, whose career brought him from the Screen Actors Guild to the Governance of California and eventually to the White House itself. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, meanwhile, we are introduced to Ufa – 'Universum Film AG' – founded in 1917 by the German Government High Command with the support of prominent financiers, industrialists and ship owners, and with backing from a number of banks. Ufa's official mission was to advertize Germany according to government directives. *Metropolis* is but one of Lang's movies released by Ufa²⁶. Of course an inevitable correlation can be drawn between Ufa and I.G. Farben, both of which wielded huge control over Germany's affairs in the 1940's. This connection is made explicit in *Gravity's Rainbow*, when Von Goll admits that he gets much of his film stock from Spottbilligfilm AG in Berlin (another I.G. outlet) (387). This is one obvious example of the complicity – between the giants of consumerism and of the movie business in manipulating people into leading their lives in accordance with their dictates. Interestingly, this is a point also made in *Vineland* in relation to Reagan and the cable companies whose machinations turn America into what is described as a 'prefascist twilight' (371). Politics, as will be discussed towards the end of the chapter, is thus ever to the fore in Pynchon's novels.

It is important to remember that in spite of their manipulation, movies can also benefit the characters, for the imaginative world they generate can help to protect them from the horrors of external reality. Frenesi, for example, describes how she distances herself from the part she played in Weed's betrayal and (apparent) death in order to enable her to continue with her life: 'She was walking around next to herself, haunting herself, attending a movie of it all' (237). It is perhaps understandable that the characters of *Gravity's Rainbow*, stuck as they are in the middle of a brutal war, employ a similar strategy. There are, however, drawbacks to this, for the mediation of one's

²⁶Kracauer. 36.

reality not only protects but also deadens one's emotions and makes real human contact impossible. Frenesi, for example, finds that: 'Even sex was mediated for her now – she did not enter in' (237). Alongside her shielding from the horror of the betrayal she helped commit, therefore, is her loss of ability to participate in a bonding and life-affirming act. The conclusions to be drawn about movies as a force moulding the lives of Pynchon's characters are thus very similar to those drawn about consumerism: movies are the property of those in power (Ufa and I.G. Farben have been compared) who use them to manipulate the consumer towards accepting certain truths. The consumers themselves are glad of the structure and sense of protection offered by these fabricated worlds, but their participation in them is seen to lead inevitably to dehumanization and the collapse of meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Vineland, published seventeen years after Pynchon's previous novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, represents an important turning-point in his fiction not least because of its shifting of focus from movies to television as the dominant source of media control. The historical moment which represents the crux of the novel itself, the 'sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll' revolution of the 1960's, coincides with the technical shift from movies to television, a move greatly aided by John F. Kennedy who attributed his presidential victory to the new 'gadget'²⁷. The importance of this cultural shift is emphasized by Slade, who remarks on the much wider audience-base available to the newer medium: 'Video supersedes film, recycles the older medium, and extends its grasp over the culture by means of the cable systems whose tentacles reach even into rural areas'²⁸. This is illustrated in the intense competition among the rival cable-companies in *Vineland*: 'The cable television companies showed up in the country, got into skirmishes that included exchanges of gunfire between gangs of rival cable riggers, eager to claim souls for their distant principles' (319). The fact that the novel is set in 1984 is also significant. Safer points to a possible connection with Orwell's vision, in

²⁷ Joseph W. Slade, "Communication, Group Theory, and Perception in *Vineland*", *Critique*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Winter 1990), 127. It is ironic that Kennedy's death and the subsequent murder of his alleged assassin has become one of the most famous media events ever.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 129.

1984, of a world in which people were directed by their television screens²⁹. In Pynchon's world, viewing is, of course, voluntary but the fact that many of the characters are actually addicted could be said to make their viewing less a matter of choice than an involuntary reflex. Rushdie reminds us that 1984 was also Reagan's re-election year³⁰ – a year when forty-nine out of fifty states³¹ re-elected a man who had starred in over fifty B-movies and understood that the President of the United States is: 'The leading soap-opera figure in the great American drama, and...had better possess star value'³². The issue of control – those who control the medium of television and by corollary the people who watch it - is thus as central to my discussion of television as it was in the previous sections on consumerism and the mass media.

While Pynchon is often admired for his ability to ingest the trends and fashions of the surrounding culture – his London-based publisher of *V* describes him as being: 'Fantastically aware of everything around him. He has an incredible facility for picking up what's going on, in the papers, on the radio, everything'³³ – *Vineland* seems to have surprised many of his readers with its wealth of references to popular culture. Slade even remarks that: 'References to TV in *Vineland* were numerous enough to turn off academic audiences'³⁴, a remark which, it must be said, reflects far less favourably on these so-called 'academic audiences' than on the author himself. Certainly *Vineland* is different to Pynchon's previous novels in that it limits its cultural references almost solely to those of the popular and commercial variety. The only notable literary reference is to a passage from Emerson read out at the annual reunion of the Becker-Traverse families, but even this is mediated for it is not the original, but rather its quotation in a 'jailhouse copy' of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James, that has become a central part of the families' mythology (369). This

²⁹ Elaine B. Safer, "Pynchon's World and Its Legendary Past: Humour and the Absurd in a Twentieth Century *Vineland*", *Critique*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Winter 1990), 108.

³⁰ Salman Rushdie, "Still Crazy After All These Years", *The New York Times Book Review*, (14 January, 1990), Section 7, 36.

³¹ Norton et al., 1039.

³² Mailer, *The Time of Our Time*, 1084.

³³ Quoted in "That Which Has Seemingly Influenced Thomas Pynchon".

<http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/bio/influences.html>

³⁴ Slade, "Communication, Group Therapy, and Perception in *Vineland*", 126.

postmodernist merger of high and low culture reaches its apex when Billy Barf and the Vomitites, a rock band posing as Italians at a Mafia wedding, squeeze a suite from *Tosca* into their set somewhere between tunes from the *Italian Fake Wedding Book* (97) and television theme tunes (96). The point of this treatment of popular culture is to illustrate the postmodern undermining of historical consciousness and the collapsing of boundaries between high and low culture which has created the MTV generation drip-fed game-shows, soap-operas and canned laughter also portrayed in great detail by DeLillo and Ellis and Coupland - a point the 'academic audiences' cited by Slade appear to have missed.

Pynchon himself is obviously both knowledgeable about and fond of much of popular culture. In his Introduction to *Slow Learner*, for example, he admits his love for both cartoons: 'May Road Runner cartoons never vanish from the video waves, is my attitude' (19); and rock 'n' roll: 'As we all know, rock 'n' roll will never die' (23), a belief that is also central to the 'People's Republic of Rock 'n' Roll' founded by the students in *Vineland*. He is also known to have written 'linear notes', which appear inside album covers, for albums by Spike Jones in 1994 and Lotion in 1995³⁵. What is unusual given this degree of immersion in all areas of modern mass culture is his categorical refusal to partake in any way in the media hype surrounding his novels. In fact he even goes to absurd lengths to avoid being recognized: until a British journalist snapped a fuzzy photograph in 1997, the last known picture of him was taken in the mid-50's³⁶. The fact that this infringement on his privacy was justified by the journalist in question because of its context within a culture based on the circulation of information³⁷ is an ironic illustration that the mass media are no longer the potential source of liberation its inventors envisioned, but have evolved into an instrument of repression and entrapment. Slade compares this to the rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow*, whose invention was inspired by dreams of escaping gravity, of breaking down national borders and of achieving new knowledge. Inevitably, of course, these dreams were

³⁵ "The Uncollected Pynchon". <http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/uncollected/index.html>

³⁶ alt.culture. <http://www.altculture.com/aentries/p/pynchon.html>

³⁷ James Bone. Quoted in "Who The Hell Is He?" *The Sunday Times* (7 June, 1998). <http://www.suntimes.co.za:80/1998/06/07/lifestyle/life01.html>

perverted by the Nazis and other supranational corporations and political bureaucracies who took the rocket, wedded it to the atomic bomb, and transformed it into a permanent threat and reminder of their control³⁸. In the same way, the revolutionary possibilities of television – the 24 fps crew in *Vineland*, for example, believed that their documentary footage could expose the corruption of the system to the American public (195) – were soon perverted by those in authority and used to strengthen support for the status quo. The result is a country governed by an actor, Reagan, and populated by people dependent on television for every aspect of their identities. This is another indication that Pynchon believes that the political legacy of the 1960's represents an opportunity that went unfulfilled and that corporate America has since come to subordinate the individual US citizen.

The frightening thing about the control enjoyed by television in *Vineland* is the extent to which even deviancies have been subsumed by it. Zoyd's annual jump through a glass window has become a chat-show topic and is tolerated as long as he sticks to the prescribed routine: 'Screaming ran empty-minded at the window and went crashing through. He knew the instant he hit that something was funny. There was hardly any impact' (11). Pynchon's novels abound with other characters who are similarly reminded of the omniscience and omnipresence of television. On her first night as executor of Inverarity's estate, for example, Oedipa is subject to a twofold manipulation by television: Firstly, Metzger's appearance in a television movie makes her more vulnerable to his sexual advances, as illustrated by her simultaneous climaxing with the action on television: 'Her climax and Metzger's, when it came, coincided with every light in the place, including the TV tube, suddenly going out, dead, black' (27). Secondly, the interspersions of the movie with commercials relating to different companies all owned by Inverarity: 'Fangosa Lagoons' (19), 'Beaconsfield Cigarettes' (21), 'Hogan's Seraglio' (25); brings home to Oedipa the extent of Inverarity's empire. The fact that he and Metzger had been sure that she would allow herself to be seduced further emphasizes her powerlessness at the hands of external forces. What is significant, however, is the extent to which Oedipa welcomes this intrusion by the

³⁸ "Communication, Group Theory, and Perception in *Vineland*". 128.

media into her life. Her wholehearted immersion into her quest for information about the Trystero is an indication, according to Dugdale, that she welcomes the opportunity to escape from the external world: 'Looking around for words which enable her not to think about war, death, industrialism, she comes upon the auratic name Trystero, which fulfils this role'³⁹. Her current husband, Mucho, also uses his job as a DJ to insulate himself from the threat of an unstructured void, represented by the emptiness and soullessness of the cars he used to sell in his lot (9). Similarly, in *Vineland*, Frenesi is in the habit of keeping her television permanently switched on in the belief that it can ward off evil spirits: 'Believing that the rays coming out of the TV screen would act as a broom to sweep the room clear of all spirits, Frenesi now popped the Tube on and checked the listings' (83). It is significant that the Thanatoid population of *Vineland* – a community completely dependent on television – is said to be on the increase ever since Vietnam (320), a clear indication that television is used as a shield to protect them from contemporary reality. This tendency to seek refuge from the political and social upheavals of the late 1960's and early 1970's in commodities and in television programs was also discussed in the introductory chapter.

The mass media are also important to Pynchon's characters because they often provide the only basis for connection between them. Prairie first gets to know her mother through footage she finds of her in the 24 fps archives: 'Until you get to see her....would you settle for watchin' her?' (194). This reliance on the mass media as a basis for a relationship is undermined, however, when Prairie finally meets her mother and they find that they can communicate with each other only through the empty catch-phrases of television: 'I want you to sing the "Gilligan's Island" theme for your mother' (368). On the other hand, members of their complicated family manage to find common ground by watching television together. Frenesi's ex- and current-husbands, for example, bridge the awkwardness between them by watching 'Say, Jim', a sit-com based on 'Star Trek' together; while Prairie and her half-brother, Justin, also bond during the course of the eight o'clock movie (370). Despite fears about television

³⁹ John Dugdale. *Thomas Pynchon: Allusive Parables of Power* (GB: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1990). 129.

fragmenting families and rendering inter-personal relationships untenable, as is the case for the Zuniga family who name their television set as a correspondent in their divorce (*Vineland*, 348), therefore, it is also credited in some instances with actually forging a bond between people. In the case of San Narcisco, or L.A. as described by Pynchon in “A Journey into the Mind of Watts”⁴⁰, a shared heritage of television series is often all the inhabitants have by way of a community. As I noted in my introduction, the solidarity felt by many fans when the television series *M*A*S*H* ended testifies to the strength of this ‘community’.

As is appropriate for the inhabitants of these media-based cities, Pynchon’s characters often mould their identities around images they see on television, in much the same way as they draw on movies. The police in *V*, for example, are dedicated viewers of *Dragnet*, and have adopted many of the characteristics of their fictional counterparts: ‘They’d cultivated deadpan expressions, unsyncopated speech rhythms, monotone voices’ (364); Roseman, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, is so obsessed with Perry Mason that he puts almost all his energy into compiling a file with which he hopes someday to undermine him (11); while Hector, in *Vineland*, is constantly found to be humming theme tunes from television programs such as *Meet the Flintstones* (26). It is also the dream of many of the characters to have their actions validated by the mass media. Slothrop visualizes a photograph of himself in his Rocketman costume in *Life* magazine, with the caption: ‘Barely off the ground, the Zone’s newest celebrity “fucks up”’ (377); and Hector plans the movie version of his life: ‘With Marie Osmond as Debbi and no one but Ricardo Montalban as Hector’ (348). Pynchon’s novels are also peppered with characters who take their dependence on television a step further. In *V*, we meet Fergus Mixolydian who, by using electrodes implanted in his forearm to co-ordinate his sleep/wake cycles with the television’s on/off switch, has truly become: ‘An extension of the television set’ (56). Even more chilling is the Thanatoid community, in *Vineland*, whose collective name meaning ‘like death, only different’ refers to the zombie-like state in which they live (170). The Thanatoids are extremely

⁴⁰ Thomas Pynchon, “A Journey into the Minds of Watts”. *The New York Times Magazine* (12 June, 1966). All references will be to: <http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/uncollected/watts.html>

important for two reasons: they appear to have managed to collapse the distinctions between reality and fiction by retreating into the world of television and thus abdicating any responsibility they might have for their lives; and they have also merged the worlds of the living and the dead by existing somewhere between the two. The latter is best illustrated by the plight of Weed Atman, a figure shot simultaneously by both a gun and a camera. His apparent return from the dead is attributed by Takeshi to the fact that death has been completely trivialized by television, with its history of: 'Picking away at the topic with doctor shows, war shows, cop shows, murder shows' (218). In the same way that life has become mediated by the media, it only stands to reason that the same fate can befall death. Weed's inability to die, therefore, stems from his failure to find any difference between the two mediated states. However, it must be noted that Weed's return to life as a Thanatoid, or mediated image of his former self, does have its limitations, for the image, as I discussed earlier in relation to rocket-flight and its representation by film and calculus, cannot compare to the experience itself. The resurrected Weed is thus no more than a shadow of the former student leader and revolutionary: 'As a resident of the everyday world, Weed Atman may have had his points, but as a Thanatoid he rated consistently low on most scales, including those that measured dedication and community spirit' (218). In spite of its apparent omnipotence, therefore, television like film is seen to have its limitations. Indeed Pynchon appears to indicate that it may yet be possible to free oneself from its tyranny. Most promising is the figure of Takeshi, in *Vineland*, for he realizes his susceptibility to television and is engaged in a conscious struggle to turn his back on the zombie-like world of the Thanatoids by engaging in some karmic adjustment and entering into a fulfilling relationship with DL: 'The difference being, I think, that I'm trying to go – the opposite way! Back to life!' (171). It would appear, therefore, that in spite of the unquestionable power that television wields over the lives and identities of Pynchon's characters, he has not written off their chances of escaping just yet.

At the centre of Pynchon's novels is the issue of information, which is regarded as a most significant part of contemporary society. The characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* are fully aware of its important place in their lives and of its replacement of traditional

values and means of exchange: 'Information. What's wrong with dope and women? Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?' (258). In fact three of Pynchon's novels – *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* – have information and its effects on society as central themes. All of these novels open with the delivery of messages in a variety of forms: In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa arrives home from a Tupperware party to find a letter informing her that she has been appointed executor of Inverarity's estate (5); *Gravity's Rainbow* opens with the image of a bomb 'screaming across the sky' (3). This image turns out to be a dream of Pirate Prentice's (5) who interprets it as a subliminal indication that he is to expect some 'incoming mail' (6); and *Vineland* begins with a dream of Zoyd's that, like Pirate, he also interprets as a subliminal message: 'He understood it to be another deep nudge from forces unseen' (3). These examples are important for two main reasons: Firstly, they demonstrate that even the dreams of the characters offer them no refuge from the relentless onslaught of information; and secondly, they illustrate the use of information by those in positions of authority as a means of controlling the population. Oedipa is essentially ordered to enter Inverarity's empire by her nomination as executor; Pirate is reminded again of his sexual conditioning for his message includes a picture to help him ejaculate on the 'Kryptosam', the ink developed by Jamf which only becomes visible after coming in contact with seminal fluid (12); while Zoyd's message is a reminder from the government that it is time to perform his annual stunt (8). Neither they, nor the readers, are thus left under any illusions but that the use of information as a medium of exchange is very much the preserve of the powerful.

While some critics, like Norbert Wiener, hail communication as being: 'The cement of society'⁴¹, its benefits are generally overshadowed by an awareness of the manipulation of the message by those in control. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan expresses this dichotomy: 'Technology may become the great connector of man, or it may become the ultimate means for their subjugation and control' (321). Given

⁴¹ Norbert Wiener. *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (US: The Riverside Press. 1950), 144.

Pynchon's interest in issues of control, it is no surprise that examples in his novels relate primarily to the latter. Melley refers to the 'supremely competent mailman' behind the multiple narratives and systems of *Gravity's Rainbow*⁴²; while the central force operating in *The Crying of Lot 49* is the Trystero postal system, which was originally founded on the basis that: 'Whoever could control the lines of communication, among all these princes, would control them' (113). As well as controlling the actual means of communication, it is obvious that those in authority also control the information transmitted. Oedipa's discoveries about the Trystero and its fictional representation in *The Courier's Tragedy*, for example, are not really of very much use to her because the messages transmitted through this channel have been distorted to such an extent that she cannot read them. The word 'Trystero', for example, appears in two different forms, spelt both as above or as 'Tristero' (29); while Thurn and Taxis, the name of the family who ran the monopoly Trystero was originally set up to oppose, also becomes distorted in a children's nursery rhyme: 'Tristoe, Trisoe, one, two, three; Turning taxi from across the sea' (82). Some of these distortions are allegedly in the interest of the transmission of correct information. Mucho, for example, has to change Oedipa's name to 'Edna Mosh' so that it will sound like 'Oedipa Maas' at the other end of the broadcasting process: 'It'll come out the right way... I was allowing for the distortion on these rigs, and then when they put it on tape' (96). The vast majority of cases, however, owe more to the deliberate distortion of information than to any concern for the public. It is worth remembering that the pre-war German movies which occupy such a prominent position in *Gravity's Rainbow* also functioned as what Dugdale calls: 'the official government delivery system' (*Thomas Pynchon*, 148), brainwashing the audience with propaganda. It is clear, therefore, that both the medium and the message (to borrow terms from McLuhan) are the preserve of those in authority, and that any deviant communication can only be delivered by an alternative and generally underground system which, as Oedipa finds out, is itself also vulnerable to corruption.

⁴² Timothy Melley, "Bodies Incorporated: Scenes of Agency Panic in *Gravity's Rainbow*", *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1994), 716.

The extent to which society is moulded by the forces of communication is repeatedly emphasized by Pynchon, not least in Oedipa's revelation that San Narcisco, a product like L.A. of the mass media, resembles the inside of a radio when viewed from above: 'She thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had' (14). Stonehill insists that this sense that 'the planet is being wired into life' is palpable throughout Pynchon, and that the Internet represents the 'nervous system' that makes it possible⁴³. This metaphor surfaces in the story of Byron the Bulb which is recounted towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The fact that Byron is immortal is regarded as a threat to their profits by the 'Committee on Incandescent Anomalies', who send an agent to unscrew him from his socket. Within seconds, this information has spread along the 'Grid': 'At something close to the speed of light...every bulb in Europe knows what's happened' (650). This Grid and the speed at which information can be transmitted along it make it an obvious analogy for the Internet. Although the Internet is, of course, a means for those not in power to transmit and receive information, thus making it at least a potential source of anarchy, Pynchon, as I mentioned in my introduction, does not appear overly optimistic that it can be used as an instrument of change. The fact that Byron's story ends with a prophesy: 'Someday he will know everything, and still be as impotent as before' (654) is a reference, according to Stonehill, to all the e-mail addicts of the world who have access to as much information as they want, but find themselves able to do so little with it. This emphasizes yet again that information and the channels of communication belong to those in power, and that regardless of how much information an individual, like Oedipa, gathers it will be useless to them because they will not have the facilities to decode and use it. Information, therefore, still demands an intelligence to value and structure it.

Besides the Internet, Pynchon displays a thorough knowledge of other contemporary advances in technology and refers to them throughout his novels in order

⁴³ Brian Stonehill. "Pynchon's Prophecies of Cyberspace".
<http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/mason/bsto-ulin.html>

to illustrate his various concerns. Unfortunately, his obvious expertise on the subject is not always appreciated by the critics. Larner, for example, claims that Pynchon himself is a victim of the same inanimate world his characters are so helpless against, and that *V*, through its very technique: 'Loses the fight against mechanical domination and becomes one more symptom of the disease it portrays'. For Larner, therefore, *V* is no more than a lifeless construct itself: 'A novel of acts, constructed by a Master Engineer'⁴⁴. This section of the chapter will deal with the issue of technology in the novels of this 'Master Engineer', focusing particularly on those aspects already discussed in relation to the forces of consumerism and the mass media: the use of technology to control society, the dissolution of boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, and the objectification and alienation that results.

McLuhan is optimistic about the effects technological advances will have on society, for he believes they will produce a global culture that will transcend divisions and undermine imposed patterns of control (*Understanding Media*, 5). Pynchon does not seem so sure, and the effects of technology are accordingly portrayed in his novels as being predominantly negative. The battle between humanity and machine, animate and inanimate forces, is a dominant theme in many of his novels. The supremacy of the latter is illustrated in *V* through the evolution of the title character from the lively schoolgirl, Victoria Wren, to the collection of mechanical parts she has become by the end of her life: 'Both eyes glass but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix could ever be' (411). Many of Pynchon's characters suffer from anxiety about their own increasing colonization by technology. Profane's personal version of the nightmare is based on a story he heard about a boy: 'Born with a golden screw where his navel should have been' (39). The boy's attempt to remove this screw results in his falling apart: 'The screw is gone....Delirious with joy, he leaps up out of bed, and his ass falls off' (40). In Profane's dream, the disassembly continues until there are parts scattered all over the pavement. Indeed this fate is not too distant for many of the characters who are gradually transforming themselves from animate to inanimate

⁴⁴ Jeremy Larner, "The New Schlemihl", *Partisan Review*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 1963), 274.

creatures. We meet characters like Bongo-Shaftsbury, who has wired his brain to a switch implanted in his arm: 'These wires run into my brain. When the switch is closed like this I act the way I do now. When it is thrown the other-' (*V*, 81); Tchitcherine, who is 'more metal than anything else' (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 337); and Frenesi, who has become the mechanical eye of her camera (*Vineland*, 200). The problem is that this subordination of animate to inanimate is thought to result in the death of the soul for it appears that behind all the false parts is nothing but a void. This is illustrated in Profane's nightmare in which nothing is left when the mechanical parts of which he is composed lie scattered in the street (40). Another consequence of this tendency towards mechanization is that human relations are undermined, as illustrated in the widespread replacement of one's human sexual partner with a mechanical one. In *V*, Rachel spurns Profane's advances in favour of her MG: 'You beautiful stud...I love to touch you...Your funny responses, darling, that I know so well...the way you start to shudder around 5000rpm when you're excited' (*V*, 28); and numerous characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* fantasize about the V-2 Rocket which is also portrayed in phallic terms: 'Enzian...in the course of a wet dream where he coupled with a slender white rocket' (297). This copulation with an object also results in the reduction of women to the status of objects in men's sex lives. The women in *Gravity's Rainbow* complain that they are now regarded as mere collections of sexual parts: 'Tits 'n' ass. That's all we are around here' (507). This objectification also has wider political connotations because, as Slade explains, the reduction of another human being to the status of an object means one does not feel an obligation to treat them with any humanity (*Thomas Pynchon*, 48). This is illustrated by the persecution, in both *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, of the Hereros, and, of course, historically by the behaviour of the Nazis who, having reduced the Jews to valueless objects, could subject them to all manner of brutality. This is perhaps the main danger associated by Pynchon with the forces of technology which have such an influence on our society - that our obsession with mechanical things will lead inevitably to our inability to respond to each other in any way but as objects, with the same horrifying consequences as were seen in Nazi Germany.

In the first half of this chapter, I have examined the forces that I am arguing exert the most important influence on contemporary society - the forces of consumerism, the mass media and technology. I believe that my discussion has proved without doubt that these forces are indeed fundamental to the organization of the modern world as it is represented in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon. One very important point I have made regarding each one of these forces is that they are clearly the preserve of those in power, who use them to manipulate and control the rest of the population who are disempowered and objectified as a result. In the second half of the chapter, I will focus on these characters and examine the strategies they adopt in order to survive in such a world. I will begin by looking at the way in which many characters narrate an existence for themselves, participating in both real and imaginary plots with the aim of insulating themselves from the void they believe surrounds them. I will also discuss the way in which many of Pynchon's characters turn to religious or scientific explanations (or more often a mixture of the two) in order to try to explain the world and their place in it.

One very noticeable characteristic of Pynchon's fiction is the extent to which both the narratives and the characters themselves are obsessed with patterns and plots. This obsession is grounded, according to Tanner, in the widespread fear among recent American writers that the unpatterned, unconditioned life of the American dream has been replaced with ubiquitous control over our thoughts and actions⁴⁵. In *V*, the shaping force of all the action is a cipher, the letter 'V', which gives the novel its title. The narrative also adheres to a V-shaped structure for while the two main protagonists, Stencil and Profane, begin the novel at opposite extremes – the former seeing patterns everywhere, the latter seeing only randomness – they eventually end up together on Malta: two initially divergent lives thus converge on a single point. The forces that appear to be controlling Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49* are less subtle, in that she is more aware of her manipulation than either Stencil or Profane. However, whereas the structure of *V* clearly indicates the presence of such a force, neither Oedipa nor the

⁴⁵ Tony Tanner, *City of Words - A Study of American Fiction in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (London: Jonathon Cape Ltd., 1971), 15.

reader is ever fully sure if the evidence she uncovers points to the existence of an underground movement or if she is merely the victim of a hoax perpetrated by her late ex-husband: 'Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something Inverarity set up before he died?' (116). There is no such uncertainty in *Gravity's Rainbow* where the characters are acutely aware of their manipulation by 'Them', or the 'The Firm' as they are also known (32). Although unidentified, it is abundantly clear that this force is one dedicated to annihilation, for their most effective instrument is the Rocket, in whose vicinity many of the male characters (including Slothrop) have been conditioned to have an erection. The situation changes slightly in *Vineland* where the controlling forces are clearly identified as government agent Vond and his troops. Finally, in *Mason and Dixon*, like the novels before *Vineland*, the controlling forces are never identified, although they are thought of in vaguely religious terms: 'Forces beyond his ability at present to reach, - a Station of the Cross being his preferr'd Trope' (158). As the novel proceeds, it becomes increasingly obvious that Mason and Dixon are indeed being used by some larger agency and that the boundaries they studiously lay down in America will be perverted from their original use as soon as they are finished: 'Hearken, Gentlemen, - Someone wants your Visto. Not your Line, nor the Boundary it defines. Those are but a pretext' (601). Of course the Mason-Dixon line was, very soon after this, subsumed into the larger narrative of American history, for it became the boundary during the Civil War between those states which supported slavery and those that did not. It is clear, therefore, that this sense of having one's life controlled by an external force - be it the government or some unnamed agency - is one which pervades all of Pynchon's novels.

The fascinating point about the controlling forces depicted in Pynchon's novels is the complicity of the characters in their continued existence, an occurrence that proves that the relationship between manipulator and manipulated is not always as straightforward as it may initially appear. Many of the characters make the point that however uncomfortable it may be to be subject to a controlling narrative, it is much

worse to be set adrift without any form of connection at all⁴⁶. Profane describes his most fundamental fear as finding himself alone in an empty world: ‘Some of us are afraid of dying; others of human loneliness. Profane was afraid of land or seascapes like this, where nothing else lived but himself’ (I, 20); while Slothrop also makes his preference for a life of control by external forces clear: ‘Either They have put him here for a reason, or he’s just here. He isn’t sure that he wouldn’t, actually, rather have that *reason*’ (434). In spite of their torment, these characters continue to regard their manipulation by external agencies as preferable to the alternative of isolation. Their determination to remain under the control of these forces is illustrated by their refusal to face the possibility that they may only be figments of their imaginations. Stencil, for example, is aware that his obsessive search for clues about V may be but a symptom of his isolation: ‘It may be that Stencil has been lonely and needs something for company’ (54). However, he refuses to even contemplate ending his quest: ‘He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid’ (55). Similarly, Oedipa decides to insulate herself from the possibility that the evidence she has uncovered may be but part of a hoax by retreating, temporarily at least, into a nervous breakdown: ‘Old fillings in her teeth began to bother her....Waves of nausea, lasting five or ten minutes, would strike her at random, cause her deep misery, then vanish as if they had never been’ (118). Nor can we really blame them for refusing to let go of their fantasies, for, as Sanders points out, when one is no longer part of a plot it is only a matter of time until one loses one’s identity: ‘Isolated from external schemes, character dissolves’ (186). This fate is precisely that which befalls Slothrop who, having escaped from Their control, literally dissolves and fragments: ‘Slothrop...has begun to thin, to scatter’ (509). By the end of the novel, he has become like a ghost, visible only to Pig Bodine: ‘One of the few who can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more’ (740). Having thus established the presence of narrating or structuring forces in Pynchon’s novels, and, moreover, the need expressed by the characters to believe in them in order to survive as integrated beings, I will now examine both the basis for this

⁴⁶ This is a point that will be discussed at length in relation to the characters in DeLillo’s novels.

need for order and the methods used by the characters to ensure that they remain subject to its control.

The need to find a coherent narrative on which to base our lives is, according to Henry Adams, himself a historian and one of Pynchon's great influences⁴⁷, very much a twentieth-century phenomenon, for the undermining of many traditional metanarratives which shaped society in the past: 'When God was a father and nature a mother', has left us directionless and vulnerable⁴⁸. Stencil's insistence on referring to himself in the third person - in a parody of Henry Adams - is clearly an attempt to convince himself that his life is part of a larger narrative: 'Herbert Stencil, like small children at a certain stage and Henry Adams in the *Education*...always referred to himself in the third person. This helped "Stencil" appear as only one among a repertoire of identities' (62). Of course, the problem with these assumed identities is that they often obliterate any remaining vestige of self a character might retain. By thinking of himself purely in terms of: 'He Who Looks for V' (226), therefore, Stencil loses any identity he may once have possessed and becomes, as his name suggests, a 'stencil' - not a person but merely a process by which patterns and designs can be produced. While narratives are obviously important as a means of inscribing one's presence on the world, therefore, an over-emphasis can lead to one's becoming a mere function of the narrative and one's subsequent reduction to an empty cipher or stencil.

Given the widely acknowledged modern preoccupation with signs: 'Modern man is above all an interpreter of different signs, a reader of differing discourses, a servant of signals, a compelled and often compulsive decipherer'⁴⁹, it is not surprising that some of the most important controlling narratives in Pynchon consist of language itself. The assertion in *Mason and Dixon* that: '(life) is Text - and we are its readers, and its Pages are the Days turning' (497) is applicable to many of Pynchon's protagonists, like Stencil whose name refers to the activity of composing a design or structure. Berressem suggests that one of the many connotations that can be drawn from

⁴⁷ Pynchon refers to the influence that Adams had on his fiction in his Introduction to *Slow Learner*, 13.

⁴⁸ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 382.

⁴⁹ Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, 77.

Oedipa's name is that of the OED, or the Oxford English Dictionary⁵⁰, a very suitable allusion for a character who obviously relates to the environment surrounding her as a kind of text she must struggle to read. More specifically, if the ending of her name – **Oedipa** – is emphasized, the text with which she struggles is clearly the language of her father (Inverarity does, after all, represent a kind of father figure to her). Much of her quest focuses on the word 'Trystero', which fascinates her from the very first time she hears it: 'Trystero. The word hung in the air...hung in the dark to puzzle Oedipa Maas, but not yet to exert the power over her it was to' (51). Her obsession with this word is compared to the Puritan obsession with the Word: 'You're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words' (53). This Puritan connection is also made in relation to Slothrop, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, who wonders whether his immersion in a plot is an inevitable consequence of his heritage: 'Did They choose him because of all those word-smitten Puritans dangling off of Slothrop's family tree?' (207). Of course the irony in relation to *The Crying of Lot 49* is that Oedipa's ardent study of the word 'Trystero' does not lead her to any revelation, but rather to an endless proliferation of other words and signs, all of which conspire to confuse her even further: 'Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself' (66). She even goes so far as to speculate that, unlike the Puritans for whom the Revelation would lead to eternal life, the endless clues and references to the Trystero are there to try to hide the fact that there is no revelation: 'She wondered if the gemlike "clues" were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night' (81). Mendelson points to the novel's title as proof that the Revelation will always be just out of reach for Oedipa. Since the word 'Pentecost', he explains, derives from the Greek word for 'fiftieth', the crying by the auctioneer of the forty-ninth lot suggests the moment before a Pentecostal revelation: 'The end of the period in which the miracle is in a state of

⁵⁰ Hanjo Beressem, *Pynchon's Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 82.

potential, not yet manifest⁵¹. That the heroine of *The Crying of Lot 49* is afforded no more than a brief mention in the later novel *Vineland* is an indication, perhaps, that she never did have her Revelation, and is still living an empty, insignificant life while she waits.

Rather than regarding *The Crying of Lot 49* as an example of how to interpret a text, Oedipa's approach to her quest serves rather as a warning about how not to read Pynchon, for she fails as a reader in a number of fundamental ways. Her first mistake, according to Carter, was to assume that the text which confronted her was meant to be solved, instead of regarding it as an 'open text' capable of accommodating many interpretations (35). She imposes her own interpretation on the painting 'Bordando el Manto Terrestre' – she is so upset by the apparent captivity of the embroidering girls that she begins to cry (13) – instead of realizing, as Siegel points out, that the painter's name, Remedios Varo, which means 'various answers', was trying to indicate to her: 'The relativity of truth and multiplicity of possible conceptions of reality' (6). Her second fundamental mistake was her presumption that she would definitely have a revelation. This belief is rubbished by Sr. Rochelle, in *Vineland*, who warns Prairie that to have any meaning, understanding must come as a result of a concerted effort: 'Common sense and hard work's all it is. Only the first of many kuniochi disillusionments....is finding that the knowledge won't come down all at once in any big transcendent moment' (112). Another basic problem Oedipa has is her inability to interpret, or even read, the clues she uncovers. When she first comes across the W.A.S.T.E. system, for example, she gets her punctuation wrong and thus loses much of the meaning inherent in the words: 'It's W.A.S.T.E., lady....an acronym, not "waste"' (60). She is also unable to distinguish important information from trivial nonsense, and is thus constantly bringing into the equation information, such as a meaningless children's nursery rhyme, which only leads to further confusion. Far from leading either Oedipa or the reader towards a significant revelation, therefore, *The Crying of Lot 49* undermines the very possibility of interpretation by focusing on the

⁵¹ Edward Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*". From Mendelson, ed., *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1978), 135.

absence of the skills needed to decode the text. In this sense, it could be argued that she is as much post-Puritan as she is postmodern. This is an interesting observation to extend towards Pynchon himself, for although many of the anxieties that characterize his novels – the over-saturation of society with the signs and images of consumerism and the mass media, and the subsequent destabilization of meaning – are related to postmodernism, they could also be attributed to a post-Puritan environment in which life is no longer explained by one all-encompassing metanarrative.

The difficulties experienced by both Pynchon's readers and his protagonists in their attempts to penetrate the text with which he confronts them is attributed by Tanner to the author's own fear that he himself might be controlled and his words distorted by the very language he uses (*City of Words*, 16). In an attempt to avoid this, he distances himself from his narratives and leaves the onus of interpretation on the reader and our fictional representatives. Nevertheless his narratives abound with instances of manipulation, both subtle and oblique. In his Introduction to *Slow Learner*, for example, instead of editing or even re-writing his short stories in order to bring them up to date, Pynchon decides instead to manipulate the reader by telling us what we should both notice and disregard about the texts: 'What I find interesting about the story now is not so much the quaintness and puerility of attitude as the class angle' (6). There are also many examples of this manipulation to be found within the novels themselves. Clerc points out that the tone used by those narrating often conditions the way we react to the characters. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, the tone is breezy and informal when dealing with the American characters, but becomes more formal and serious when describing the Germans (18). Less subtle, though no less pervasive, are instances when the characters themselves deliberately distort their stories in order to serve their own purposes. Stencil, the surrogate author of *V*, frequently 'stencils' or repatterns the information he gains about V to support what he already knows: 'I only think it strange that he should remember an unremarkable conversation, let alone in that much detail, thirty-four years later. A conversation meaning nothing to Mondaugen but everything to Stencil' (249). Oedipa also forces us to read the text from her perspective, for the collection of clues she offers to us for our perusal is indicative, Dugdale suggests, of her

own selectiveness rather than of any fantastic perception she may appear to possess (*Thomas Pynchon*, 129). In both *Vineland* and *Mason and Dixon*, the narratorial intrusion is more direct. Takeshi and DL both participate in the telling of their story to Prairie, and discuss whether or not to leave some parts of it out: ‘Maybe we should just skip over the sex part here....She is just a kid’ (149); while Rev. Cherrycoke’s reliability as a narrator is undermined by a similar tendency to censor the information: ‘They have heard....an Herodotic Web of Adventures and Curiosities selected, the Rev. implies, for their moral usefulness, whilst avoiding others not as suitable in the Hearing of Youth’ (7). Baker makes the point that the Rev.’s sojourn with the LeSpark family will last only for as long as he can keep his audience amused. Like Sheherezade, it is in his best interest, therefore, to extend his narrative as far as possible by including: ‘Detailed speculation and lengthy accounts of stories he describes at the outset as false’⁵². Interestingly, the Rev.’s narrative is also subject to manipulation by various members of his audience: the twins, Pitt and Pliny, who beg him to end on a happy note for their fictional representatives, Mason and Dixon: ‘Perhaps this would be a good moment for us to abandon the Narrative’ (315); the young lovers, Tenebrae and Ethelmer, who focus on the romantic aspects of the tale (527); and numerous listeners who urge the Rev. to invent the contents of Mason’s long-lost letters in order to provide the narrative with a sense of continuity: ‘Make up something, then, – Munchausen would’ (720). These exhortations forcibly make the point that in relation to story-telling, as with every other force or narrative previously discussed in this chapter, the characters are not only aware of their manipulation by external agencies, but actually encourage their presence and the structures they impose.

As a final point in relation to Pynchon’s manipulation of both his protagonists and his readers through his narratives, I would like to address the issue of the names he gives his characters throughout his fiction – names which have the dual result of trapping the characters within some implied characteristics and predisposing the reader

⁵² Stephan Baker, *The Fiction of Postmodernity* (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh Press, Ltd., 2000), 134.

towards certain expectations about them⁵³. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, we meet a number of characters whose names lend themselves to multiple connotations. Oedipa, for example, could stand for OED (Oxford English Dictionary), as befits a character Petillon describes as being: 'so hung up on words'⁵⁴; or alternatively for 'odd'⁵⁵; or even 'od', a word meaning 'sad and lonely' from *The Waste Land*, a poem often referred to in Pynchon⁵⁶. Her surname 'Maas' also has a number of possible derivations. It could refer to the 'mass' media⁵⁷; to the Afrikaans word 'maas' which means 'net' or 'web', and thus perfectly describes her situation⁵⁸; to 'maas' which means 'loophole' in Dutch, suggesting that her activities could in fact represent a way of helping her to escape from her entrapment⁵⁹; or alternatively to Newton's Second Law of Motion, in which 'mass' is a term denoting a quantity of inertia, suggesting perhaps that all her activity is controlled by an external force⁶⁰. Most critics point to the obvious derivation of her name from Sophocles' Oedipus myth, a relation that traps both the reader and Oedipa herself into thinking that her mission is to find out what it is her destiny to know. Despite this obvious similarity to the story of Oedipus, however, Stark points out that many other parts of the classical tale and its psychoanalytic baggage do not apply to Pynchon's Oedipa (13), an indication perhaps that Pynchon may be trying to blur rather than sharpen the character's outlines with all this information, in order to show that things often cannot be understood as easily as may initially appear.

Some of Oedipa's fellow-characters also enjoy, or perhaps suffer, similarly complicated names. 'Pierce Inverarity', for example, could refer to the penetration of

⁵³ Seed reminds us that names also represent an important source of control for the authorities in *Catch-22*, which is why Yossarian's campaign of forging signatures is regarded as such a subversive act. *The Fiction of Joseph Heller*, 38.

⁵⁴ Pierre-Ives Petillon, "A Re-cognition of Her Errand into the Wilderness". From Patrick O'Donnell, ed., *New Essays on "The Crying of Lot 49"* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1991), 141.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Beressem, 82.

⁵⁷ Bernard Duyfhuizen, "Hushing Sick Transmission: Disrupting Story in *The Crying of Lot 49*". From O'Donnell, ed., 84.

⁵⁸ Cathy N. Davidson, "Oedipa as Androgyne in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*". *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1977), 43.

⁵⁹ Siegel, 5.

⁶⁰ Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, 60. Newton's Second Law of Motion states that the rate of change of momentum is proportional to the force causing it, and takes place in the direction of this force.

Oedipa's – and, by extension, the reader's – mind by the alleged author of the Trystero hoax (and thus the novel as a whole). It could also be read as an exhortation to Oedipa to try to 'pierce veracity', or find out the truth. Slade suggests that it could be a play on 'Professor Moriarty', arch-rival of Sherlock Holmes (like Oedipa a collector of clues) and master of nefarious design (*Thomas Pynchon*, 108); Johnston believes it could refer to C.S. Peirce, the American founder of semiotics⁶¹, again appropriate to Inverarity's suspected authorship of the plot; while Stark points out that the town of Inverarity, in Scotland, was the bastion of the Protestant reformation and that Pynchon may thus be implying that he agrees with Weber's connection between Protestantism and capitalism. It is hardly a coincidence that Inverarity was also the birthplace of James Clerk Maxwell, inventor of Maxwell's Demon, which, as I will discuss later, is such a dominant metaphor in each of Pynchon's novels⁶².

One of the most exhaustively discussed and analyzed names in Pynchon is that of Slothrop, the main protagonist in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Stark suggests that it represents an amalgamation of 'sloth', meaning laziness, and 'rop', which is a term used when an editor has the right to place an ad wherever it is convenient in a newspaper⁶³, referring, perhaps, to Slothrop's narration by controlling forces who can make him react even in the most intimate of ways, the most obvious example being his conditioning to get an erection whenever in the vicinity of a V-2 rocket. Simberloff points out that 'Sloth' could be an acronym for the **Second Law of Thermodynamics**, which expresses the tendency of life to progress towards a state of increasing disorder⁶⁴. This is obviously very appropriate to Slothrop who not only sees the world around him degenerate into chaos – from the neat dichotomy between the opposing sides during the war to the melting-pot of cultures and nationalities in the borderless Zone – but disintegrates

⁶¹ John Johnston, "Toward the Schizo-Text: Paranoia as Semiotic Regime in *The Crying of Lot 49*", From O'Donnell, ed., 56.

⁶² Thomas Schaub, "A Gentle Chill, an Ambiguity: *The Crying of Lot 49*", From Pearce, ed., 57.

⁶³ Stark, 13. Pynchon also discusses the concept of sloth in the context of Aquinas' thesis on the deadly sins in his essay "Nearer, My Couch, to Thee", *The New York Times Book Review* (6 June 1993). All references will be to this article as it appears at:

<http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/uncollected/sloth.html>

⁶⁴ Daniel Simberloff, "Entropy, Information, and Life: Biophysics in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon", *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, vol. 21 (Summer 1978), 617.

himself as the novel progresses until finally he becomes a scattered mess of fragments. Finally, in *Mason and Dixon*, the narrator, Rev. Cherrycoke, has his authority undercut by the absurdity – not to mention anachronism – of his name; and Mason is automatically welcomed by the Free-Masons because of his name, although he is neither a believer in nor a supporter of their creed (290). This last example is yet another indication of how Pynchon undermines or mocks the act of naming by giving his characters names that are either inappropriate (in the case of Oedipa and some of the wider connotations of the Oedipus myth) or false (Mason and his presumed connections with Free-Masonry). Although the names given by Pynchon to his characters thus open our eyes to a multitude of wide-reaching references, an overemphasis on these connotations can ultimately confuse us and destabilize the characters themselves. What these names demonstrate, therefore, is the lack of connection that exists between signifier and signified in the postmodern world.

One final way in which Pynchon undermines his characters is by having them cross over between his different novels. This has the effect of ensuring that we always remain aware of their fictionality. As Stark says they come to resemble puppets which Pynchon can take out of his box whenever he chooses (18)⁶⁵. The fact that Oedipa, who was the central protagonist in *The Crying of Lot 49*, hardly merits more than an offhand reference in *Vineland* where her divorce is described as: ‘Remarkable even in that more innocent time for its geniality’ (309), is one example of how the reappearance of a character serves to undercut the prominent role they may have played in an earlier novel. Pynchon also uses this technique against the reader. The most obviously recurring of all of Pynchon’s motifs is the letter ‘V’, which gives two novels, *V* and *Vineland*, their titles. It appears throughout *V*, both as a character with multiple identities that include Victoria Wren (64), Vera Meroving (236) and Veronica Manganese (472), and also as a structural design or stencil along which the action of the

⁶⁵ Characters who appear in more than one novel include: Kurt Mondaugen and Lt. Weissmann (*V* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*); Mucho Maas (*The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*); Takeshi (*Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Vineland*); and Rev. Cherrycoke (*Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason and Dixon*).

text is structured⁶⁶. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, we come across 'Vesperhaven House', a home for senior citizens founded by Inverarity where Thoth is resident (63). *Gravity's Rainbow* is obviously pervaded by the V-1 and V-2 Rockets. We must also remember, of course, the plethora of new terms and clichés adopted by the Nazis in order to drum up nationalist support. Words like Volk, Volkskrieg, Vergeltunswaffe, etc., lurk behind the scenes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, adding to the atmosphere of menace. The evil force in *Vineland* is also appropriately Brock Vond; and the surveyors, in *Mason and Dixon*, are treated to a concerted attack on their maleness by the Vroom women (60), while they are in Cape Town to observe the Transit of Venus, or 'V-ness', as Rosenbaum puts it⁶⁷. Besides forming a cohesive vein that runs throughout his fiction, Pynchon also uses his repetitive V's in order to condition his readers. As this last paragraph indicates, it is easy for the reader to become as obsessed with 'V' as Stencil, eagerly focusing on each manifestation of the letter as it appears in the various texts. As Sklar says, the cipher becomes: 'Charged with greater resonance with every repetition, until the eye responds to every capital letter V as if it were inked in red'⁶⁸. We would do well to remember that the key to *I* is the mysterious word 'Vheissu' (157), which Eddins interprets as 'V is you'⁶⁹. The fact that both characters and readers are chasing clues referring back to themselves is but another indication of how much under Pynchon's control we are. Here the narrative clearly dramatizes the idea of a closed system of reference similar to that proposed by Farina.

Many important aspects of Pynchon's fiction were covered during this section of the chapter which focused on narratives. I began by illustrating the extent to which Pynchon's characters and even the structures of the novels themselves are obsessed with

⁶⁶ Raymond M. Olderman points out that the original hardback edition of *I* had a violet cover! *Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 128.

⁶⁷ Ron Rosenbaum, "Mason and Dixon", *The New York Observer* (18 November, 1996), <http://www.hyperarts.com/pynchon/mason-dixon/rosenbaum.html>

⁶⁸ Robert Sklar, "The New Novel, USA: Thomas Pynchon", *Nation*, vol. 205 (25 September 1967), 278. Thompson also remarks on the threat inherent in the letter "v": "The English language is not crowded with words beginning with the letter "v" that suggest anything but trouble. After violence and vengeance, there is also vulgar, vicious, victim, vermin, vain, vacant, vile, vampire", *Generation of Swine*, 172.

⁶⁹ Dwight Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 65.

patterns. The backgrounds to the various narratives seen to be acting as controlling forces in the novels were discussed: some were seen to represent manipulation by those in control, others were self-imposed by characters desperate to have something with which to structure the surrounding void. The use of language itself as a means of control was examined, and it was revealed that the quests undertaken by many of the protagonists were based on letters or words, such as 'V' and 'Trystero'. The use of linguistic distortions in order to manipulate was also discussed in relation both to specific examples within the texts themselves and to Pynchon as the author. Finally, I illustrated how the reader also falls into this trap in relation to the endless appearances of the letter 'V'. Having thus established the presence of controlling narratives throughout Pynchon's fiction, I will now discuss the two most important and widespread narratives used by the characters in order to explain and structure their worlds: the narratives of religion and science.

Religion is a particularly appropriate narrative to discuss in relation to ideas of control and order because, as Sanders points out, God is the 'original conspiracy theory': 'An otherwise chaotic world makes sense because it is perceived as a plot, narrated by God' (76). Although the presence of God in the postmodern world has been destabilized, the point made throughout Pynchon's fiction, as Olderman comments, is that the impulse towards belief in a superior being and desire for spiritually higher existence is still as strong as ever (*Beyond the Wasteland*, 199). Certainly religious mythology and imagery play an important role in Pynchon's fiction. *V*, for example, could be described as a struggle between the inanimate, spiritless waste land and an almost demonic force planting clues and patterns which Stencil follows with religious zeal; *The Crying of Lot 49* is obviously based on the idea of the Pentecostal revelation, with understanding always just out of reach; *Gravity's Rainbow* explores the dichotomy between the Puritan extremes of sacred and profane, Elect and Preterite; *Vineland* offers new-age alternatives to conventional religions and also suggests the possibility of a return to the Eden-like Vineland of the past; and *Mason and Dixon* dramatizes the basic similarities between religion and science. Many critics believe *Gravity's Rainbow* to be modelled on a reworking of the old Puritan 'jeremiad', which is defined as a text

relating to the apocalyptic and millennial visions which prevailed in the Puritan culture of colonial New England: 'A mournful complaint, an expression of sorrow, a lamentation denouncing evil...refers to any literary work which contains prophecies of destruction or complaints about the state of society and the world'⁷⁰. Pynchon clearly believes that the jeremiad is an appropriate vehicle for his expression of a world being brought further and further along the brink of destruction by new and more deadly technological advances. The Rocket is widely acknowledged to be the agent of apocalypse in the novel, as emphasized by its constant couching in religious terms: Slothrop, for example, imagines death by V-2 in terms of: 'A Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then silence forever' (25). Although invented by Weissmann as a means of transcending gravity, and thus perhaps death itself, the fact that Gottfried, the cargo of the mysterious Schwarzgerat, dies shortly after its launch clearly indicates that the Rocket is an angel of death rather than of redemption, as fitting for the central motif of a novel based on the death-wishing Puritan jeremiad. These examples indicate, once more, that this Puritan legacy is perhaps as important to Pynchon as his postmodern heritage.

Another important Biblical symbol pervading *Gravity's Rainbow* is the image of the rainbow which gives the novel half of its title. In Genesis, the rainbow represented the covenant made after the flood by God with Noah that there would be no more destruction on earth⁷¹. In other words, the rainbow of Genesis was a token of second chances and a promise of renewal⁷². In Pynchon, however, the promise inherent in the rainbow is undermined by its connection with gravity, which inverts God's covenant by forcing all things, finally and inexorably, down and into the earth: 'An absolutely neutral promise that all living things will die'⁷³. The 'gravity's rainbow' of the title can thus be interpreted, as Safer suggests, as referring to the parabolic course of the Rocket, wreaking destruction on the world and contributing to the entropic lust for death and

⁷⁰ Marcus Smith and Khachig Toloyan, "The New Jeremiad: *Gravity's Rainbow*". From Pearce, ed., 169.

⁷¹ Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, 78.

⁷² Sanders, 184.

⁷³ Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, 78.

disorder which Pynchon sees as the controlling process of life in all his novels⁷⁴.

The landscapes depicted in Pynchon's novels have often been likened to that which appears in T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. Wolfley, for example, describes Pynchon's writing as: 'Haunted by an awareness of T.S. Eliot's fundamental point – that a totally secular culture is absurd and unworkable'⁷⁵, a belief mirrored in the attempts made by the characters to create systems of belief for themselves out of any available resources. These range from a widespread immersion in various quests directed towards spiritual revelation; to the tendency to invest commodities with transcendent meaning, like Mucho, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, who: 'Believed in the cars. Maybe to excess' (8). Unfortunately, the fact that the agency in which Mucho so fervently believes is the National Automobile Dealers' Association, whose initials 'NADA' refer to the vacuum or nothingness that lies at its heart (100) suggests that these attempts to locate transcendence in the surrounding environment are doomed to fail because they provide only the illusion of relief from the void or waste land surrounding them. Ironically, Pynchon seems to blame the secularization of society and its disastrous results for the human psyche at least in part on religion itself – specifically on the Puritanism that defined and influenced America from the start. Weber's connection between religion and capitalism manifests itself throughout the novels, most notably in the 'materialistic spin'⁷⁶ given by many of the characters in *Vineland* to the teachings of Zen and other religions. Zen Buddhism is based on the seventh century teachings of Bodhidharma, which herald meditation as a means of blocking out desire for attachment to worldly things. This is inverted and reduced to the level of the profane in *Vineland* through its colonization by contemporary consumerist culture. Prairie works at the 'Bodhi Dharma Pizza Temple', where the workers are given 'meditation breaks' (45); the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives has evolved from a spiritual order to one based almost solely on the desire to improve cash flow (107); and the Harleyite Order represents a male motorcycle club which, for tax purposes, has been reconstituted

⁷⁴ Elaine B. Safer, "The Allusive Mode and Black Humour in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*". From Pearce, ed., 158.

⁷⁵ Wolfley, "Repression's Rainbow". From Pearce, ed., 102.

⁷⁶ Safer, 117.

as a group of nuns (358). What these examples demonstrate is that religion has restructured itself so as to survive in an increasingly competitive market. This relates to the phenomenon of 'televangelism' discussed in the introduction, which similarly represents the reshaping of the religious message in order to make it more appealing to its audience (and accordingly more profitable for its sponsors).

In spite of the many destructive tendencies associated with religion that I have examined throughout this section of the chapter, Pynchon nonetheless holds out some hope for the coming of the Redeemer. Although Siegel, at the end of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna", chooses to sacrifice his guests in order to save himself from imminent massacre⁷⁷, his counterpart in "Entropy", Meatball Mulligan, makes the opposite choice, thus redeeming himself: 'He decided to try and keep his lease-breaking party from deteriorating into total chaos: he gave wine to the sailors and separated the *morra* players'⁷⁸. Similarly, in spite of all the doubts discussed in relation to Oedipa's reading of the Trystero, the fact that at the end of the novel the auctioneer raises his hands in a manner reminiscent of the performance of sacred rites: 'Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture: perhaps to a descending angel' (127), suggests that a revelation may be imminent after all. Although Pynchon focuses primarily on the obstacles facing the characters on their quests for transcendence, therefore, he does not completely rule out the possibility that they might some day find the answers for which they have been searching. With the exception of these last few examples, however, Pynchon tends to base his hope for redemption less on religious dogma than on a variety of machines and new technologies. In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which Pynchon uses the language and metaphors of science to provide his novels with a structure and a background for the dramatization of many of his themes.

Science and literature, as C.P. Snow argued, have traditionally been inimical, so much so that at the time he gave his renowned lecture in 1959 academia had become

⁷⁷ Thomas Pynchon, "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna". *Epoch* (Spring 1959). All references will be to this story as it appears on the Internet at:

<http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/uncollected/vienna.html>

⁷⁸ Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy". From *Slow Learner*, 97.

divided into two separate extremes: 'I believe the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups: At one pole are the literary intellectuals....At the other pole are the scientists'⁷⁹. Pynchon marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of this lecture with an essay "Is It O.K. to be a Luddite?"⁸⁰ in which he examines the origins of the hatred of technology among the Luddites, a group who flourished in Britain between 1811 and 1816⁸¹. By the time Pynchon wrote his essay, however, Snow's condemnation of intellectuals as Luddites would no longer hold up as many areas, including science and literature, have begun to merge: 'Today nobody could get away with making such a distinction....all the cats are jumping out of all the bags and even beginning to mingle'. Pynchon's own background is suitably mixed. Although he initially began his academic career in the Department of Engineering Physics at Cornell University, he transferred, after a term of duty with the Navy, to the College of Art and Science where he was taught for one semester by Vladimir Nabokov, before graduating with a degree in English in 1959⁸². In the early 1960's, while writing *V*, he also worked as an 'engineering aide' for Boeing, in Seattle, a job that consisted of re-writing technical reports in a style approved by Boeing⁸³. He makes full use of his scientific training and knowledge throughout his fiction. His long and detailed account of Esther's nose-job in *V* is but one example of his meticulous research into such procedures: 'Schoenmaker first made two incisions, one on either side through the internal lining of the nose, near the septum at the lower border of the side cartilage' (105). So thorough is his scientific knowledge that he is as frequently regarded as a writer of science-fiction as of literary fiction. Mackey points out, for example, that *Gravity's Rainbow* was nominated for the Nebula Award (best science-fiction novel of

⁷⁹ C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution: The Rede Lecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 3-4.

⁸⁰ Thomas Pynchon, "Is It OK To Be A Luddite?" *The New York Times Book Review* (28 October, 1984). All references will be to this article as it appears on the Internet at:

<http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/uncollected/luddite.html>

⁸¹ Supporters of the movement included Mary Shelley who was working on *Frankenstein* – a novel which explores the dangers inherent in technology when it is allowed get out of hand – during 1816.

⁸² "The Straight Dope". <http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/bio/prophet.html>

⁸³ "Boeing, Boeing". <http://pynchonfiles.com/Boeing.Boeing.html>

the year)⁸⁴. Its failure to win either this or the Pulitzer prize in 1974 is an indication, perhaps, that *Gravity's Rainbow* fitted into neither category sufficiently neatly to please the judges. The scientific element of *Gravity's Rainbow* is further legitimized by the fact that one of the journals that reviewed the novel was *Scientific American*. Pynchon would no doubt be pleased that this last fact has also featured on the popular television show *Jeopardy*: 'Category was American Authors. For \$1,000 "*Scientific American* was one of the magazines that reviewed *Gravity's Rainbow*"'⁸⁵. This clearly signals the amalgamation of science, literature, high and low culture which many theorists believe is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary, postmodern society. Having thus established that Pynchon uses his interest and knowledge of science throughout his fiction, I will now discuss specific examples of the scientific and mathematical theories he uses to structure the world in which his characters live. My focus throughout this section will be on how Pynchon's characters look to the narratives of science, as they do to consumerism and the mass media, to provide them with an epistemology by which they can live in an increasingly chaotic environment.

Science is often used as a basis of control in Pynchon's novels. Slothrop's sexual conditioning which, according to Kappel, reduces him to the status of: 'A footnote in the history of science'⁸⁶, is clearly based on the work of Pavlov who conducted conditioning experiments on dogs. Vond, the manipulative and controlling government agent in *Vineland*, is particularly devoted to a theory which alleges that a tendency towards criminal behaviour can always be read in the facial features: 'The brains of criminals were short on lobes that controlled civilized values....caused the crania that housed them to develop differently, which included the way their faces would turn out looking' (272)⁸⁷. Vond's use of this as a way of classifying people is reminiscent of the blatant misuse of scientific theory, such as Mendel's laws of genetic classification, by the Nazis as the justification for their massacre of the Jewish

⁸⁴ Douglas A. Mackey, *The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon* (California: The Bongo Press, 1980), 6.

⁸⁵ "1961-6: The Pynchon Files". <http://pynchonfiles.com/1961-66.html>

⁸⁶ Lawrence Kappel, "Physic Geography in *Gravity's Rainbow*", *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1980), 227.

⁸⁷ Interestingly this theory is one that also appeals to Mason, in *Mason and Dixon*: 'Large Eyebrows....betray a leaning to pugnacious eccentricity' (595).

population – the so-called unclean or impure element of society. Another lasting legacy of the concentration camps, according to Mailer, is the realization that human life can be reduced to a statistic: ‘Doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted, and our hair would be saved’⁸⁸. As we would expect, many of Pynchon’s characters are devoted to this idea that their lives may have a statistical underpinning. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Enzian suggests that life itself exists only on the basis of statistics: ‘I think we’re here, but only in a statistical way....The slightest shift in the probabilities and we’re gone – schnapp! Like that’ (362). Roger Mexico is a great believer in Poisson’s distribution, an equation that helps one to work out the probability of an event occurring. Mexico initially uses Poisson’s equation in order to predict where the German bombs will fall in London. However, as is often the case in Pynchon, the equation soon seems to supersede reality, and it begins to appear as though the equation is actually controlling where the bombs fall rather than merely charting them: ‘The rockets *are* distributing about London just as Poisson’s equation in the text books predicts. As the data keeps coming in, Roger looks more and more like a prophet’ (54). The fact that the areas in which the rockets fall also correspond to the areas in which Slothrop has just had sex: ‘It’s the map that spooks them all, the map Slothrop’s been keeping on his girls. The stars fall in a Poisson distribution, just like the rocket strikes on Roger Mexico’s map of the Rocket Blitz’ (85), further underlines the apparent control of the equation over all aspects of life. The panic that besets the characters of *Mason and Dixon* when the Julian calendar is updated with the loss of eleven days: ‘What’s become of the Eleven Days? and do you even know? You’re telling me they’re just...gone?’ (191) is yet another indication that statistics, such as dates, are regarded not as mere mathematical tools by Pynchon’s characters, but rather as constituting the basis on which their world is built. This is another point at which Pynchon’s characters are closely related to DeLillo’s, for many of the latter also look to numbers to provide them with a sense of structure and meaning.

One area of mathematics that is of particular importance throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow* is calculus, the mathematical tool used to predict and describe the parabolic

⁸⁸ *The Time of Our Time*, 211.

trajectory of the Rocket by breaking it into minuscule sections, each denoted ' dt '. Pynchon's characters also use calculus in order to describe their fascination with the idea of what exists beyond death. It is particularly well defined in *The Crying of Lot 49* by Oedipa, who realizes that the suffering experienced by the sailor as he died in her arms was a consequence not only of 'DT' (delirium tremens), but also of ' dt ' (time differential): 'A vanishingly small instant in which chance had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself as something innocuous' (89). The zero of death to which each dt (change in time) brings us even closer is located both at the apex of a parabola and at the corresponding point at which the rocket reaches 'Brennschluss', or 'end of burning': the highest point of its course when it starts on its symmetrical descent to earth. This point is also important because it represents the end of human control over the rocket: science powers its acceleration as far as Brennschluss, but thereafter it is its own weight and the force of gravity which pull it down to earth: 'A switch closed, fuel cut off, burning ended. The Rocket was on its own' (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 301). By corollary, life is controlled up until the point of death when it passes into the unknown. These connections are made even more explicit with reference to another symbol drawn from calculus, the double integral ' ff '. At various times throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, this is used to define the rocket: 'To integrate here is to operate on a rate of change so that time falls away: change is stilled' (301); the Nazis, who are also known as the 'SS' (299); life, in that it suggests the shape of lovers lying together: 'Katje lies, quick and warm, S'd against the S of himself' (198); and death, through its similarity to: 'The ancient rune that stands for the yew tree, or Death' (302). It is clear, therefore, that calculus represents an important and fertile source of imagery for Pynchon. Not only does he use it to project the shape of the path taken by his Rocket and the progress of his characters towards death, but he also uses its symbols, Δt and ff , in order to demonstrate the fundamental connections that exist between apparent opposites, such as humanity and the Rocket, life and death. This is a particularly interesting example because it demonstrates the extent to which these scientific narratives are being used by the characters to explain all aspects of life and death to them.

Another scientific concept that is fundamental to Pynchon's fiction is the binary system, in which everything is represented either by one or zero, and which forms the basis of computing. Both Oedipa and Frenesi specifically refer to computing as a means of ordering life: 'It was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above' (*The Crying of Lot 49*, 125); 'If patterns of ones and zeros were 'like' patterns of human lives and deaths' (*Vineland*, 90). Pynchon's novels are also full of examples of binary opposites: black and white, Elect and Preterite, animate and inanimate, and so on. Snow's warning that: 'The number two is a very dangerous number' (9) is particularly well dramatized in *Mason and Dixon*, where the protagonists become increasingly convinced that the boundary they are drawing has evil connotations. Zhang's contention that such a line can lead only to disaster: 'All else will follow as if predestin'd, unto War and Devastation' (615) is justified by the fact that the Mason-Dixon line became the division, during the American Civil War, between those states that advocated slavery and those that did not. Of course given Pynchon's obvious dislike of the simple dichotomy, it is no surprise that many apparent opposites are merged in his novels in order to focus on what Oedipa calls 'excluded middles' (125). Tanner suggests that the real function of the Trystero is to fulfil the yearning for diversity and unprogrammed possibilities which are missing from a world increasingly digitized by the ubiquitous computer (*City of Words*, 177). Stonehill similarly points to the rainbow of *Gravity's Rainbow* as an indication that Pynchon wished to remind us of: 'The colourful spectrum between the extremes, the analog glories that hang suspended above the on and off of black and white'⁸⁹. One final point I would like to make in regard to binary divisions is that the fact that they are susceptible to collapsing must mean that they are not truly different to begin with⁹⁰. As Carter remarks, an important aspect of the 'opposites' which appear in Pynchon is that they are not true opposites, but rather *ideas* of opposites, for unlike absolutes ideas can be changed: 'They remain open

⁸⁹Brian Stonehill, "Pynchon's Prophecies of Cyberspace".
<http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/gr/bsto.html>

⁹⁰ This is similar to the point made by Baudrillard with regard to the metanarrative of history whose demise he claims is a consequence of the fact that it was never more than 'an immense simulation model' to begin with. *The Illusion of the End*, 7.

to reformulation and restatement' (3). Pynchon, therefore, uses the idea of binary division mainly in order to collapse it and reveal the whole range of possibilities that exist between the polar extremes.

By far the most important theory used by Pynchon to explain the direction in which he believes the world to be heading is the scientific concept of entropy. Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics basically states that within a closed system (such as the universe) all progress tend towards disorder, a state also known as 'entropy'⁹¹. That the lives of many of Pynchon's characters unfold according to this law is apparent in the increasing chaos that besets them as the novels unfold. Slothrop, whose name, according to Simberloff, is an acronym for the **Second Law of Thermodynamics** (617), is a particularly good example of an initially integrated character whose being becomes scattered, eventually into oblivion: 'Scattered all over the Zone. It's doubtful if he can ever be "found" again, in the conventional sense of "positively identified and detained"' (712). Entropy is also a measure of the energy in a system that is not convertible into work. The higher the level of entropy, the less energy available, until finally a state of inertia or stagnation is reached. Wittgenstein's assertion that: 'The world is all that is the case'⁹² is echoed throughout *V* as an encoded warning to the characters that their world does indeed represent the kind of closed system in which entropy thrives. It is significant that the original title of the novel was *World On A String*⁹³, an idea that appears within the text in the frequent description of characters as 'yoyos', and is, according to Slade, a metaphor of broad application to the modern human condition, suggesting: 'A spinning in place, or inertia in motion'⁹⁴. Oedipa's tower in *The Crying of Lot 49* also represents a kind of closed system: 'All that had then gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of that tower' (13), and her life has also begun to show signs of approaching a state of equilibrium, as demonstrated by the levelling of differences: 'Shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed....more or less identical' (6). All the indications suggest that if Oedipa does not

⁹¹ Alan J. Friedman, "Science and Technology". From Clerc, ed., 84.

⁹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (GB: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1961), 5.

⁹³ David Seed, "In Pursuit of the Receding Plot: Some American Postmodernists". From Smyth, ed., 49.

⁹⁴ *Thomas Pynchon*, 73.

do something to open her system, her energy will slowly degrade until she is nothing more than a body of random disorder. Slothrop, as I have discussed above, is a particularly extreme example of the 'random disorder' that may lie ahead for Oedipa. Indeed even the narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow* appears to be subject to the force of entropy, for it progresses from an initial state of coherence to a fragmented and disjointed closing section. Vidal goes so far as to call the novel: 'A practical exercise in entropy', exhausting the patience and energy of its readers⁹⁵. *Gravity's Rainbow* is, therefore, an excellent example of how Pynchon uses the concept of thermodynamic entropy both to depict the inertia and increasing tendency towards disorder displayed by his characters, and as a way of structuring the text itself.

Entropy is also of vital importance to the scientific concept of information theory, which Dutta defines as: 'The mathematical theory of communication that is used to find out the speed and quantity of information transmission'⁹⁶. The interesting point about entropy in relation to information theory is that it increases, rather than decreases, the potential of the system. This is because the more disordered and random a system becomes, the less structured (and thus controlled) the information it contains. In these terms, Oedipa should certainly be the most successful of all Pynchon's questers for information, because the deluge of signs and symbols she uncovers must contain a wealth of information which would be lost or unavailable if the system were more orderly. Brillouin explains that total entropy decreases whenever we happen to have some specific information about the structure of our physical system⁹⁷. By this formulation, the fact that the Trystero has multiple potential meanings should cause an increase in entropy and a corresponding increase in the value of the information gained. However, several factors prevent this from happening. For one thing, as Dutta points out, the Trystero is an unstable structure which has been in a state of degradation since the eighteenth century, a deterioration which manifests itself in the different spellings of

⁹⁵ Gore Vidal. "American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction". *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 23, no. 12 (15 July, 1976), 38.

⁹⁶ Anindita Dutta. "The Paradox of Truth, the Truth of Entropy".
<http://departments2.pomona.edu/pynchon/entropy/paradox.html>

⁹⁷ Leon Brillouin. "Physical Entropy and Information II". *Journal of Applied Physics*, vol. 22, no. 3 (March 1951), 342.

the word: 'Tristero' (29), 'Trystero' (51). The result is that after over two hundred years, the information Oedipa has managed to gather does not justify the amount of energy she has wasted on it. Another problem is that the transmission of information through language systems results, paradoxically, in what Mangel describes as: 'Massive destructions of information'⁹⁸. The line containing the word 'Trystero', for example, is repeatedly distorted to such a degree that the information originally contained in it is finally negated, as its inclusion in a children's nursery rhyme illustrates. Finally, as is the case with thermodynamic entropy, too much information in a system can also paralyze and overwhelm. This is precisely what happens to Oedipa, for the information she has gathered about the Trystero eventually overwhelms her to the point that she is no longer able to distinguish between what is real and what is not: 'Spent the rest of the night finding the image of the Trystero post horn....What fragments of dreams came had to do with the post horns. Later, possibly, she would have trouble sorting the night into real and dreamed' (81)⁹⁹. It would appear that Pynchon thus had no choice but to continue to hide the meaning of the encoded message at the end of the novel, for to reveal it would have represented a violation of the theory of information. Regardless of the potential that exists for the growth of different forms of information in a highly entropic state, therefore, the disorder inherent in the system itself makes both transmission and interpretation of the message highly improbable. This clearly relates to Baudrillard's argument that the saturation of society with the signs and images of consumerism and the mass media has destabilized the possibility of genuine understanding and communication: 'We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 79). The dominant role played by these forces in contemporary society is obviously a leading contributory factor in the growth of entropy noted by Pynchon.

Although, as Nefastis explains to Oedipa, the equations which express entropy

⁹⁸ Anne Mangel, "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy and Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*. From George Levine and David Leverenz, eds., *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1976), 97.

⁹⁹ Lyotard makes the point that this formulation could be applied to many modern bureaucracies who often stifle the systems they control and asphyxiate themselves in the process. *The Postmodern Condition*, 55-6.

in both thermodynamic and information theory look quite similar, the two fields are almost entirely unrelated except at one point: 'Maxwell's Demon', so named after its inventor, James Clerk Maxwell, which represents a hypothetical way to challenge Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics¹⁰⁰. Nefastis herself builds a machine which he claims demonstrates how the concept of Maxwell's Demon directly links communication with mechanical energy: 'All you had to do was stare at the photo of Clerk Maxwell, and concentrate on which cylinder, right or left, you wanted the Demon to raise the temperature in. The air would expand and push a piston' (60). Oedipa's disappointment when she fails to operate the machine: 'For fifteen minutes more she tried; repeating, if you are there, whatever you are, show yourself to me, I need you' (74), demonstrates how much she wants to participate in the ordering of the random information that surrounds her. Despite this failure, however, Oedipa does in fact play the role of a Maxwell's Demon throughout the novel, through her attempt to sort out and organize the massive amounts of data emanating from Inverarity's estate. It cannot be a coincidence that Inverarity, whose surname is derived from the name of the town in Scotland in which Maxwell was born¹⁰¹, was the one who appointed Oedipa to her task. Just as Maxwell invented of the Demon, therefore, Inverarity started Oedipa on her task of trying to impose order on the varied and random information she gathers: 'She would give them order, she would create constellations' (63). Rosenbaum suggests that Mason and Dixon also stand, both acronymically (through their initials, M and D) and metaphorically, for a two-headed version of Maxwell's Demon, because just as the Demon functions by dividing molecules into two states, a hot region and a cold region, so too do the surveyors in Pynchon's novel divide disputed territory into two

¹⁰⁰ Maxwell's Demon was a tiny being who operated a shutter on a wall dividing a box of air into two sections, A and B, allowing only the swifter moving (and hotter) molecules into one section, and the slower into the other. The Demon would thus reverse equilibrium and return energy to the system in contradiction of the Second Law. James Clerk Maxwell, *Theory of Heat* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1921), 338.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Schaub, "'A Gentle Chill, an Ambiguity': *The Crying of Lot 49*". From Pearce, ed., 57.

States¹⁰². In a perversion of the normal relationship of cause-and-effect, which would no doubt delight Pynchon, Rosenbaum's article actually predates the publication of *Mason and Dixon*, and is thus written in anticipation of what metaphoric connotations might be drawn by Pynchon from the work of the surveyors, as opposed to constituting an analysis of what Pynchon does in fact write. In a sense then, Rosenbaum is himself also functioning as a kind of Maxwell's Demon, attempting to impose order on Pynchon's text, and managing in the process to collapse traditional binary divisions.

The challenge to Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics in the form of Maxwell's Demon came to an end in the 1950's, when Brillouin pointed out that some form of energy would be needed by the Demon so that he could see what he was doing: 'In an enclosure at a constant temperature, the radiation is that of a "blackbody", and the demon cannot see the molecules. Hence, he cannot operate the trap door and is unable to violate the second principle'¹⁰³. The introduction of the necessary energy – light, for example – might solve the Demon's problem, but the overall balance of entropy would increase. Brillouin's discovery obviously has an important effect on the efficacy of many of Pynchon's own sorting demons. As I discussed above, the more order (and thus energy) Oedipa tries to impose on the information she gathers, the more it spirals out of control. This is because the entropy that decreases due to the Demon's sorting, increases again due to the input of energy into the system needed in order for him/her to carry out the task. Similarly, the energy created by the boundary imposed by the surveyors in *Mason and Dixon* contributed significantly to the explosion of enmity during the Civil War. Whereas a high degree of entropy within a system, therefore, may be beneficial as far as information theory is concerned, in that it reduces certainty and thus increases the potential for information, many of Pynchon's protagonists find themselves approaching a state of maximum entropy, where uncertainty is so rife that meaning and understanding become unattainable. This can also be related to the postmodern demise of traditional structuring metanarratives which, as I illustrated in the

¹⁰² Ron Rosenbaum. "Mason and Dixon". *The New York Observer* (18 November, 1996). <http://www.hyperarts.com/pynchon/mason-dixon/rosenbaum.html>

¹⁰³ Leon Brillouin. "Maxwell's Demon Cannot Operate: Information and Entropy I". *Journal of Applied Physics*, vol. 22, no. 3 (March 1951), 334.

introduction, has left many feeling lost and confused.

Entropy in both thermodynamic and information theory is obviously a concept with which Pynchon is fascinated, and he exploits it to its full potential in relation to the lives of his characters and the quests on which they embark. As well as focusing on its scientific applications, however, Pynchon uses entropy as a metaphor for how the world appears to be losing energy as the second millennium draws to a close. As Stark points out, he is particularly interested in three of entropy's bi-products: waste, disassembly and inanimateness (52). The first of these bi-products, waste, is a consequence of the information which 'leaks' out of a system during transmission. In the closed environment in which Pynchon's protagonists live, language has become exhausted or wasted. I have already discussed how the over-use of the line in which Oedipa first hears the word 'Trystero' has caused the information it originally held to be negated. The problem, according to Saul, in "Entropy", is that words appear to have lost their meanings: 'Tell a girl: "I love you". No trouble with two-thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, *that's* the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit' (90-1)¹⁰⁴. If Saul is to be believed, we are stuck within a vicious circle, for the entropy which causes words to become meaningless waste in the first place, is itself subsequently increased when these empty signifiers or 'noise' are fed back into the system. This relates again to Farina's image of the closed system of signification in which Gnosso finds himself trapped.

The second bi-product of entropy, as suggested by Stark, is that of disassembly or fragmentation, a tendency I have already discussed in relation to a number of Pynchon's protagonists: Stencil, who is unable to impose a rigid and linear form on the clues he has gathered about V, feels both himself and the object of his quest begin to disintegrate in the face of the increasing disorder: 'Stencil that way had left pieces of himself – and V – all over the western world. V by this time was a remarkably scattered

¹⁰⁴ This idea of noise and its connection to death's imminent approach is also a central feature of DeLillo's *White Noise*, and will be discussed in the next chapter.

concept' (389); when her quest for structure becomes increasingly improbable due to the high levels of entropy generated by her very efforts, Oedipa also succumbs to a kind of mental fragmentation: 'The toothaches got worse, she dreamed of disembodied voices from whose malignance there was no appeal, the soft dusk of mirrors out of which something was about to walk' (121); and Slothrop, having escaped from Their structures into the chaos of the Zone, disintegrates both mentally and physically towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*: 'Slothrop...has begun to thin, to scatter' (509). These characters thus fulfil the prophecy of the Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics, for they become increasingly disordered until eventually the energy remaining in the system runs so low that they are unable to prevent themselves from disintegrating. In other words, an over-proliferation of information, as Baudrillard argues, does indeed lead to personal collapse.

The third of the bi-products of entropy listed above is that of homogenization. This has its roots, of course, in thermodynamic entropy where the levelling of differences results in stagnation and inertia. A system that approaches this state of maximum homogeneity will die in what Wiener calls: 'Warmetod' – universal heat death (*The Human Use of Human Beings*, 22). This tendency towards homogenization, which is a result of the increasing presence of entropy in our society, is also related to a broader movement towards death, which many theorists believe is one of the defining characteristics of the modern world. The stasis of the thermometer and the death of all motion noted by Callisto at the end of "Entropy", for example, also heralds his own demise: 'The moment of Equilibrium was reached...and the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion' (98)¹⁰⁵. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, a number of characters express their sexual-attraction to the Rocket, death's chief agent: Slothrop gets an erection every time he is in the vicinity of a V-2 (738); Enzian dreams of having sex with the Rocket: 'Enzian had his illumination, in the course of a wet dream where he coupled with a slender white rocket' (297); while Gottfried essentially marries the Rocket and shares

¹⁰⁵ See Michael Wood. "Rocketing to the Apocalypse". *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 20, no. 4 (22 March, 1973), 22.

its final orgasm of destruction: 'The flame is too bright for anyone to see Gottfried inside, except now as an erotic category, hallucinated out of that blue violence, for purposes of self-arousal' (758). The fact that these examples appear within a book based in post-war Germany is particularly appropriate given that the Nazis, as Olderman points out, were the ones who personified this attraction to death most completely: 'Nazis were the entropic result of nationalism become rigid and mysticism usurped by the Manichean/romantic ego: Nazism is the name for the entropic death-wishing element of human consciousness'¹⁰⁶. Tanner points to the Trystero as another example of this death-wishing force: 'There is a strong suggestion that the Trystero system represents the process of entropy-turned-Manichean, stealthily at work bringing disorder and death to the human community' (*City of Words*, 177); while Hilfer suggests that the Trystero's logo, a muted post horn, also symbolizes: 'Ultimate silence, absolute entropy, heat death' (151). An obvious indication is given by one of the system's acronyms: 'D.E.A.T.H.....DON'T EVER ANTAGONIZE THE HORN', which Oedipa spots on the seat of a bus (84). The disappearance of many of the men who help at various stages of her quest, as well as her own gradual fragmentation suggests that her attempts to decrease entropy and thus postpone death may indeed have 'antagonized' the Horn. The increasing entropy present in the world inhabited by Pynchon's characters is clearly steering it in one direction only: towards inertia, stagnation, disintegration, and eventually death.

The conclusion that the high level of entropy present in the modern world can only lead us towards death is not in keeping with Pynchon's well-known dislike for the binary 'either/or' dichotomy. It is no surprise, therefore, that the seemingly inevitable death-ward drive of the world inhabited by his characters is also punctuated with an occasional glimmer of optimism, as well the kind of fatalistic humour which also characterizes the fiction of DeLillo. In this final section on entropy, I will examine some of these possibilities and their potential to save humanity from the 'heat-death' towards which postmodern culture appear to be heading.

It is fitting that one of the sources of this hope is linguistic. Friedman reminds us

¹⁰⁶ Raymond M. Olderman, "Thomas Pynchon", *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 20, no. 4 (1979), 502.

that the wording of Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics is crucial, for it states that within a closed system progress **tends** towards disorder. There is, however, no law demanding that the universe must always behave in this way, merely that it tends to¹⁰⁷. As a result, there is, as Pearce points out, always a chance of a system not running down – or of a force that counteracts thermodynamic entropy¹⁰⁸. The fact that Oedipa's surname means 'loophole' in Dutch is one indication that *The Crying of Lot 49* should be regarded not only as an exposition of the process of entropy in American society but also as: 'An examination of the loopholes in the metaphor itself'¹⁰⁹. Hendin insists that Pynchon's symbol for human salvation is not the cross but the proverbial 'partridge in the pear tree': 'The bird lives off the pears; his droppings fertilize the tree so it can make more pears; the bird makes more droppings'. In this instance, nature is revealed to be self-perpetuating: 'A Newtonian motion machine powered by crap'¹¹⁰. Nor is this the only occasion on which potential rebirth is located by Pynchon among what is generally considered to represent the waste of society: I discussed the potential inherent in marginalized groups such as the Hereros of *Gravity's Rainbow* and the 'excluded middles' of *The Crying of Lot 49* who, appropriately communicate via the W.A.S.T.E system, earlier in this chapter.

Some critics argue that by becoming involved in their quests in the first place, Pynchon's protagonists are saving themselves from inertia and thus halting the tide of entropy¹¹¹. If this is true, then the majority of Pynchon's characters are potential redeemers, for they are generally still seeking revelation even when the novels close. The problem with this theory is that it fails to take into account that many of the characters appear not to be acting freely, but rather as if they are being manipulated by external forces. Others claim that entropy can be avoided once human beings become open systems. One way in which this can be accomplished is through love which, by metaphorically keeping open the boundaries between people, can be both vital and

¹⁰⁷ Alan J. Friedman. "Science and Technology". From Clerc, ed., 84.

¹⁰⁸ Introduction to Pearce, ed., *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Siegel, 5.

¹¹⁰ Josephine Hendin. "What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us? I" and *Gravity's Rainbow*". From Pearce, ed., 42.

¹¹¹ See Mangel, "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy and Information". From Levine and Leverenz, eds., 92-3.

resistant to entropy. Whereas most of Pynchon's characters are closed systems, a few, like Roger Mexico and Paola Maijstral, resist the disintegration around them by loving. This idea that love can conquer all is also, of course, expressed in *Vineland* by Zoyd, one of the novel's hippies: 'Frenesi, do you think that love can save anybody? You do, don't you?' (39). Unfortunately, Zoyd realizes the naivety of this belief when Frenesi dumps him soon afterwards. One of the problems associated with this idea that salvation resides in love is that the concept itself has long been trivialized. I referred earlier in the chapter to the 'leakage' which one of the characters in "Entropy" claims to have emptied the word 'love' of meaning and reduced it to the status of a cipher: 'That nasty four-letter word in the middle, *that's* the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even' (90). In *Vineland*, Frenesi comes to the same conclusion: 'The word *love*...its trivializing in those days already well begun, its magic fading, the subject of all that rock 'n' roll, the simple resource we once thought would save us' (217). The belief that love offers a means of resisting entropy is thus ridiculed even by the characters themselves, who point to its trivialization as an indication that it no longer possesses the power it once had to change the world. Again this point can be related to Pynchon's disillusionment with post-1960's America, in which so many traditional ideals appear to have been sacrificed to a corporate mentality. This point will be discussed at greater length towards the end of the chapter.

This chapter has provided a detailed and comprehensive examination of the many forces that are present throughout Pynchon's fiction, controlling and moulding the lives of the characters and of the narrative itself. The conclusion that must inevitably be drawn is that there is no escape, for Pynchon's characters at least, from the manipulation of these forces. The fact, moreover, that many of these forces encourage or even propel the world towards a state of increasing entropy and disorder, as indicated by the inanimateness, fragmentation and alienation experienced by many of the characters, suggests that the future is looking fairly bleak. In this final section, I will discuss the two main strategies adopted by the characters as a means of coping with the world in which they live: a retreat into a paranoia, which is a negative move; and a reclamation of family, which I will show is a far more positive and life-affirming course

to take.

Paranoia has long since become a feature of the contemporary world. As Vidal points out, of the many words with which mental therapists have ‘enriched’ our language, paranoia is one of the most used, if not most useful¹¹². Its central image, as Hofstadter illustrates, is of a vast and sinister conspiracy, set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life¹¹³. Although the single most vivid example of the triumph of the paranoid style in the modern world happened in Nazi Germany, it has also manifested itself in various displays of ‘Americanism’ which have characterized the twentieth century. References to McCarthy and the HUAC, and to later repression under both Nixon and Reagan, in *Vineland*, serve to remind us that behind the humorous descriptions of contemporary American television and mall-culture lies what is indeed: ‘A renascent fascist state’¹¹⁴. Given Pynchon’s preoccupation with the prevailing structures and trends of modern society, it is no surprise to find that paranoia is also a central concern of his fiction. From the early short stories through to *Mason and Dixon*, his many characters display most, if not all, of the classic ‘paranoid tropes’, as defined by Slade: ‘The fear of psychological, corporate and state control; sensitivity to messages and codes; the quasi-religious obsession with words that intersect; the struggle against guilt that freights psyches; the search for “higher order variables” that survive transformations of life and death’¹¹⁵. Many of these ideas have already been discussed in the course of this chapter: the forces of consumerism, the mass media and technology were demonstrated to wield considerable power – both conscious and unconscious – over the characters; while various narratives, like those of religion and science, were seen to represent potential sources of transcendence from their ordinary lives. I also drew attention to the fact that Pynchon himself is possibly the most guarded – one could even say paranoid – contemporary writer when it comes to protecting his privacy. Paranoia is thus clearly a presence both within the novel itself and in the

¹¹² Gore Vidal, *United States: Essays 1932-1992* (US: Random House, Inc., 1983), 768.

¹¹³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1964), 4.

¹¹⁴ Slade, ‘Communication, Group Theory, and Perception in *Vineland*’, 127.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

personality of its author.

Some of Pynchon's characters try to subsume themselves within their paranoia in order to avoid facing up to reality. Oedipa, for example, calls to see her psychologist Dr. Hilarious in the hope that he will tell her that she is indeed being paranoid about the Trystero: 'She wanted Hilarious to tell her she was some kind of nut and needed a rest, that that there was no Trystero. She wanted to know why the chances of its being real should menace her so' (91). Unfortunately for Oedipa, Hilarious has himself retreated into a world of paranoid delusion. Petillon suggests that the character Hilarious is based on Timothy Leary, the 1960's guru who experimented heavily with mind-altering drugs¹¹⁶. If this is the case, Pynchon could be drawing our attention once again to the failure of the counter-cultural movement of the 1960's to provide a feasible structure for contemporary life. That Oedipa would prefer to be declared insane than face up to what she has discovered is one indication of this lack of options available in modern society. Her desire to be subsumed into paranoia or even insanity can be attributed to the widespread belief among the characters that paranoia, the feeling that you are part of a conspiracy, is infinitely preferable to the opposite state of 'anti-paranoia', where nothing is connected to anything else. As Slothrop puts it: 'Either They have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that *reason*' (434). Regardless of the torment inflicted by their persecutors, Pynchon's characters thus continue to fight against the idea that their world might be structureless.

Although Pynchon offers plenty of evidence to suggest that his characters are either paranoiacs or otherwise hallucination-prone, the fascinating thing is that the conspiracies they appear to be hallucinating often turn out to be real. Plater points out, for example, that the most outrageous plots mentioned in the novels are often the ones that really happened: 'There are conspiracies that have killed sixty thousand Hereros and stacked Jewish corpses like rusted car bodies'¹¹⁷ (192-3). Likewise, the intricate Trystero plot described in *The Crying of Lot 49* is also a matter of historical record, as are the cartels which reappear as a source of control and repression throughout the

¹¹⁶ "A Re-Cognition of Her Errand into the Wilderness". From O'Donnell, ed., 127.

¹¹⁷ William Plater, *The Grim Phoenix* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 192-3.

novels. In spite of the seemingly improbable nature of the conspiracy against Slothrop, moreover, the evidence he uncovers regarding his sale to I.G. Farben as a subject for one of Jamf's conditioning experiments would seem to exonerate him from the charge of paranoia. With his whole life reduced to the status of a plot: 'All in his life of what has looked free and random, is discovered to've been under some Control, all the time' (209), and thus to a closed system, his fragmentation and internal disorder are inevitable. In Slothrop's case at least, therefore, his conviction that he is the subject of an on-going plot is proved to be correct, and not merely a manifestation of the paranoia which besets many of his fellow-characters.

Some critics believe that paranoia can sometimes constitute a positive force for the characters. Cowart, for example, claims that the information uncovered by Oedipa, although occasionally frightening and leading eventually to a nervous breakdown, is still better than 'the drab predictability' that robs the modern world of a spiritual dimension (*Thomas Pynchon*, 24); while LeVot is convinced that Pynchon himself regards paranoia as a positive force, elevating his characters from the status of ciphers and making them feel important: 'It gives (the characters) a purpose in life, a becoming: like Oedipus it is for (them) a matter of life and death to solve the riddle'¹¹⁸. Some of this is undoubtedly true. Paranoia does indeed bestow many of Pynchon's characters with the feeling that they do matter, as evidenced in the fear they express that they may merely be hallucinating their immersion in a plot and are, therefore, truly alone and unnoticed. However, I am not convinced by LeVot's argument that Pynchon regards paranoia as a 'liberating' force. For one thing, he is extremely critical of the Puritan rationalism that is often blamed for the excesses of America's post-industrial society. Given that many of the characters are severely marginalized by the contemporary consumerist society, it is unlikely that Pynchon would be hailing the search for patterns, which is derived from Puritanism and equated with paranoia, as a source of liberation. Furthermore, none of the characters who resort to paranoia end the novels in a happy and secure state: Stencil disappears off to Sweden on another leg of his exhausting and

¹¹⁸ André LeVot, "The Rocket and the Pig: Thomas Pynchon and Science Fiction", *Caliban*, vol. 7, no. 11 (1975), 117.

ultimately unfulfilling pursuit of V (whom the reader has learnt is dead); Oedipa, who we believe may be on the verge of fulfilment at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, reappears as a divorce statistic in *Vineland*, her former status as heroine completely undercut; and Slothrop's psyche fragments and he becomes invisible. In spite of what some of his critics argue, therefore, I do not believe that Pynchon regards paranoia as anything but a most negative and limiting course for his characters to take.

Given Pynchon's obvious distrust of many of the forces operating in the contemporary world, and his conviction that they are propelling society towards a state of inanimateness, fragmentation and final inertia, it is fascinating that he locates much of his hope for our survival as a race in the traditional – some would say archaic and outdated – institution of the family. Pynchon himself is a descendent of one of America's oldest families, the first member of which arrived from England in 1630. His rigid maintenance of a private life is an indication perhaps of his determination not to allow his own family to become corrupted or undermined by the invasive attention of the mass media. Of course family can have its disadvantages, a fact Pynchon also demonstrates in his fiction. Taking his cue from Henry Adams, whose family are described by Vidal as: 'First among the country's political families' (*United States*, 645), and who himself refers to his legacy as constituting both: 'An identity and a burden' (viii), Pynchon articulates both sides of the question through his various characters. Some draw great strength and comfort from family bonds. The Hereros, for example, to whom many critics point as a source of redemption, retain close connections even with their dead: 'Carry on business every day with their ancestors. The dead are as real as the living' (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 153). On the other hand, family could be cited as the root of all Slothrop's problems, for it was his own parents who sold him as a subject for experimentation to Jamf and I.G. Farben (286). This destruction of familial bonds is also apparent in *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which Oedipa gradually finds herself being abandoned by all the men in her life: 'My shrink, pursued by Israelis, has gone mad; my husband, on LSD...hopelessly away, from what has passed, I was hoping forever, for love; my one extra-marital fella has eloped with a depraved fifteen-year-old' (105). Given this trend, it is appropriate that Oedipa, the

mother figure of the novel as indicated, possibly, by her surname 'Maas' ('ma-s' meaning 'mothers?'), reappears later on in *Vineland* as a divorce statistic. Dysfunctional families are almost the norm in *Vineland*. Two of the characters, DL and Ché, come from abusive backgrounds, while Frenesi abandoned her family for her manipulative lover, Vond. Furthermore, when Prairie and Frenesi are eventually reunited, they find that they have little to say to one another and resort to clichés and television references to bridge the awkwardness: 'I want you to sing the "Gilligan's Island" theme for your mother' (368). This illustrates, as Hayles points out, that family bonds are based on shared experiences and mutual commitments, and that when these are lacking biological relationships are no more than an accident of birth ("Who Was Saved?", 89). Pynchon, therefore, does not initially appear to be too optimistic about the idea that the family can represent a source of strength and comfort for his characters, for his novels abound with examples of family relationships corrupted by the authorities and undermined by the actions of the characters themselves.

In spite of the examples of destructive relationships discussed above, however, the majority of the characters continue to emphasize the importance of family. When Frenesi deserts her family in *Vineland*, Zoyd and his mother-in-law, Sasha, make a conscious decision to over-ride their mutual dislike in order to provide Prairie with the most stable and united family possible. They both realize that if they are not prepared to cooperate, Prairie will most likely be taken away from them: 'No judge would waste the time deciding whose rap sheet was more disreputable... Prairie would end up as a ward of the court, and no question, they had to keep her out of that' (57). As it happens, Zoyd and Sasha's enforced co-operation eventually blossoms into mutual respect and even affection, and Zoyd begins to take Frenesi's place at the annual reunions of the Becker-Traverse families in *Vineland*. This reunion is extremely important because, as Hayles points out, it represents the point at which the recuperative potential of the family reaches its zenith ("Who Was Saved?", 88). The families symbolize their continued unity by sharing a meal and reading aloud a passage from Emerson which they interpret as implying that their bonds of kinship will always be supported by 'divine justice' in their struggle to remain cohesive in the face of increasing external pressures: 'It was the

heart of the gathering meant to honour the bond between Eula Becker and Jess Traverse, that lay beneath, defined, and made sense of them all' (369). Within the embrace of this bond, it is hardly surprising that Frenesi does eventually return to Vineland in order to be reunited with her mother and daughter. The redemptive potential of family bonds is also repeatedly reiterated throughout *Mason and Dixon*. The surveyors themselves are frequently referred to as 'twins' or as a long-married couple: 'Now, - which is the Husband?' (642). Mason is even accused by one of his children of deliberately producing the same number of sons as Dixon had daughters, in order that the close bonds between the surveyors could be replicated and further strengthened by the unions of their children: 'Two Sons. Two Daughters...Mason-Dixon Grand-Babies' (766). Rather than basing his novel on the Mason-Dixon line, which came to have such resonance during the Civil War, therefore, the fact that Pynchon's novel is entitled *Mason and Dixon* could be taken as an indication that it was the mutual affection and friendship experienced by the surveyors, and the way in which it enriched their lives, that most interests Pynchon.

This suggestion that Mason and Dixon might have been hoping to cement their friendship and pass it down to their descendants through the intermarriages of their children, much in the same way as the Becker-Traverses have in *Vineland*, is an interesting one because it refers to an idea which recurs throughout Pynchon's novels – that of a legacy. The quests undertaken by Stencil, Oedipa and Slothrop, for example, could all be regarded as an attempt to fulfil the legacies left to them by a father, an ex-husband and a surrogate father, respectively. The legacies that feature in both *Vineland* and *Mason and Dixon* are slightly different, for they allude to physical and genetically transmitted characteristics rather than to diary-entries or life-altering decisions on the part of ancestors. These novels are filled with examples of characters searching each other's faces for inherited features. The reason for this, as Hayles explains, is that likeness of form or face is often taken as evidence of lineage: 'A visible sign of the relationships that bond families together' ("Who Was Saved?", 81). Prairie is often seen searching for her mother in her own face, which she appears to regard as an amalgamation of her parents' features rather than as something unique to herself: 'It

was easy to see Zoyd in her face – that turn of chin, slope of eyebrows – but she'd known for a long time how to filter these out, as a way to find the face of her mother in what was left' (98). The fact that after having been reunited with Frenesi she can now begin to concentrate on her own individual features: 'After having just spent hours with Frenesi's face, found it easier now to make out...her own not-yet-come-to-terms-with face' (374), indicates that she is ready to assume control of her own life. Prairie's conviction that one's legacy is revealed in one's face is reiterated by Mason, in *Mason and Dixon*, who avidly searches his sons' faces for traces of their dead mother: 'Upon Days when he knows he will see them, he stares into his Mirror, memorizing his own Face well enough to filter it out of Willy's and Doc's leaving, if the Trick succeeded, Rebekah's alone, her dear living Face' (211). It is a common opinion among Pynchon's characters, therefore, that their ancestry can be read in their faces, a legacy that gives them much comfort and serves to further strengthen their familial bonds. Incidentally, this willingness to fulfil what they interpret as their legacies, as well as their devotion to the idea of inherited characteristics, could perhaps be read as another demonstration by the characters of their desperate need to find themselves connected to a narrative (one might even say *any* narrative) which might give their lives a sense of meaning and cohesion.

Family is clearly an important element in each of Pynchon's novels. In *Vineland*, however, it provides not only the stimulus for the search which constitutes its framing narrative – Prairie's search for her mother – but also the dialectic through which the remaining characters are classified. On the one hand is the 'Kinship system': the networks of close family and friends; and on the other the 'Snitch system': the networks of government agents who seek to control the population. Eventually, the latter is overthrown. This happens for a number of reasons. For one thing, as Hayles points out, the threat posed to family by the snitch system often results in solidarity rather than betrayal, as evidenced by the decision made by Zoyd and Sasha to protect Prairie from the system by strengthening their own relationship ("Who Was Saved?", 79). The alienation and isolation fostered by the snitch system is also sometimes overcome by the ties of love and friendship: Frenesi, for example, meets her second

husband, Flash, in one of Vond's 're-education camps' (70). Crucially, one of the main reasons the kinship system wins out, according to Hayles, is because of Pynchon's deliberate intervention into the action of the story. When Prairie is in danger of being co-opted into the snitch system by Vond at the end of the novel, he is yanked back into the helicopter just in time (376). This turn of events is explained within the novel as being a result of Reagan's freezing of funds for Vond's 'REX 84' exercise (376). It could also be evidence of the infallibility of the Emersonian justice that constitutes the credo of the Becker-Traverse families (89). Most importantly of all, it can be interpreted as a sign of Pynchon's determination that this novel, which incidentally he dedicates to his parents, will herald the family as the primary source of redemption and salvation. Safer points out that the novel ends with the word 'home', thus leaving us with a feeling of security and togetherness (121). She also claims, however, that this feeling of hope is undermined by the fact that the final image of the novel is of birds being killed by the Wheelers' dog, Desmond, his 'face full of blue-jay feathers' (385). For Safer the progress of the novel is thus that of a 'fallen world', for these same birds were alive in the opening sentence: 'A squadron of blue jays stomping around on the roof' (3). Although these images of the birds frame the narrative in much the same way as the Rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow*, I believe Safer is mistaken in her interpretation of the final sentences of the book. The birds at the start of the novel represent a subliminal message to Zoyd from the authorities that the time has come for him to perform his annual stunt: 'Carrier pigeons....each bearing a message for him....He understood it to be another deep nudge from forces unseen' (3). The fact that at the end of the novel these birds have been captured and eaten by Zoyd's dog, who incidentally is himself a visual symbol of the endurance of familial traits throughout the generations: 'Desmond....the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe' (385), can surely only be taken as proof that the power of the authorities has been completely undermined and that the family is once again the most fertile source of empowerment and strength.

The central question in *Vineland* is posed by government agent and television addict, Hector Zuniga, who refers to the revolutionary activities of the 1960's and asks Zoyd: 'Who was saved?' (29). This question is crucial because it draws attention once

more to what Pynchon perceives to be the political legacy of the 1960's, specifically the fact that the promises made by the counter-culture to alleviate poverty, abolish racism, and so on, went unfulfilled. Hector suggests that the situation is not too hopeful: 'One OD'd...one took a tumble in a faraway land, so on, more'n half of 'em currently on the run, and you so far around the bend you don't even see it' (29). Certainly as the historical evidence I discussed in the introduction demonstrates, few of the ideals of the 1960's survived through to the materialistic and depressed 1980's and 1990's. What is also important about this question, as Hayles explains, is that it points towards the metaphoric meaning of the family: the generation gap that separates Pynchon from readers who might wonder what the fuss in the 1960's was all about ("Who Was Saved?", 78). This desire on Pynchon's part to educate his readers about the origins of contemporary society is important because I believe that it summarizes his intentions with regard to his latest two novels. After the nihilistic and despairing condition of the society depicted in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where not even the best efforts of the Counterforce could halt the progression towards destruction, both *Vineland* and *Mason and Dixon* could be interpreted as journeys undertaken to two different points of American history in order to trace the origins of the contemporary condition. Perhaps the central historical events in these novels – the hippie revolution of the 1960's which was quashed by the government and followed by years of conservatism and repression under Nixon and Reagan; and the drawing up of the boundary between the states of Pennsylvania and Maryland which quickly solidified and became a symbol of a much deeper division during the Civil War years – each represent what Slothrop calls: 'The fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from' (556). Slothrop suspects that it may not yet be too late to correct this mistake: 'It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there may be a route back' but only if the increasing divisions within society can be overcome and obliterated: 'The whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of co-ordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up' (556). As a conclusion to this essay, I will briefly discuss Pynchon's use of history in both *Vineland* and *Mason and Dixon*, pinpointing both the mistakes he

believes were made and the lessons which should be learned in order to unify society in the face of increasing chaos and disorder.

Rushdie describes *Vineland* as: 'A major political novel about what America has been doing to itself, to its children, all these years' (37). Certainly Pynchon is critical of the loss of options, such as any feasible counterculture, which characterizes contemporary society. One of the most poignant observations of the novel, for example, is that Vond's strong-armed tactics and reeducation camps are no longer necessary because in Reagan's America the young are conservative and docile to begin with and, therefore, do not need to have their spirits broken: 'Since about '81 kids were coming in all on their own askin about careers, no need for no separate facility anymore' (347). Nevertheless, Pynchon remains confident that traditional values such as community and family, which were subverted and used as a means of control by both Nixon and Reagan, can be wrested back and used as a source of hope for the future. The fact that the novel's most serious discussion about the 'prefascist twilight' into which the country appears to have fallen (371) takes places within the comfortable context of the Becker-Traverse reunion is one indication that family has already begun to subsume politics and negate its importance by reducing it to the nonthreatening status of after-dinner chat. Zoyd's nostalgia for his wedding day when: 'Everything in nature, every living being on the hillside that day, strange as it sounded later whenever Zoyd tried to tell about it, was gentle, at peace – the visible world was a sunlit sheep-farm' (38), could be interpreted as an indication of Pynchon's own desire to celebrate the transcendental meaning inherent in the beginning of the new nation, whose unsullied beauty, as Safer points out, is evoked in the novel's title (123). It is important to realize that although the characters in *Vineland* represent only a certain type of lifestyle, and one associated primarily with Southern California, Pynchon's vision of a future in which many of the traditional values of the 1960's and earlier are restored is meant to apply to the whole of the U.S. Cowart explains that Pynchon expects the reader to connect his imaginary Vineland with the real Vineland in New Jersey, which is on approximately the same latitude. This implied spanning of the continent at the latitude of its greatest breadth indicates that Pynchon's setting is really the whole vast tract of

land that the Vikings discovered and named 'Vineland the Good', at the end of the first millennium¹¹⁹. Another millennium later, Pynchon's hope seems to be that America can become once more 'Vineland the Good', the 'harbour of refuge' as it is described in *Vineland* (316) - a place in which Americans can reconnect with the past in order to draw the strength with which to fight for a future. Pynchon is perhaps suggesting here that anxieties about the contemporary culture of information and signs can be alleviated by recourse to history.

In *Mason and Dixon*, Pynchon travels back even further into American history, to a time in which politicians, like Franklin, were scientists, rather than movie stars, and before the country experienced the psychic devastation of the Civil War. Although the boundary laid down by Mason and Dixon is generally blamed for much of the bitterness that characterized the country during the war years, however, Pynchon once more emphasizes hope rather than despair through his depiction of them in his novel. One way in which he manages this is by focusing on the fulfilling relationship enjoyed by the surveyors, rather on than the divisive nature of their work. The title of the novel, as I mentioned earlier in the essay, draws attention to their partnership and co-operation. Moreover the text itself, rather than focusing solely on their work in America, begins when they first meet in the Saloon of Mason's Inn at Portsmouth prior to embarking on their first mission together to Cape Town, and ends, many years after they return from their surveying in America, with their respective deaths. The evil which stems from the boundary they draw up in America is thus overturned to quite a large degree by its situation within the context of a fulfilling and life-long friendship.

While on his deathbed, Mason tells Franklin about an important vision revealed by the stars both to his master, Bradley, and to himself: 'Tis a Construction... a great single Engine, the size of a Continent'. The fundamental point about this construction is that it is as yet incomplete, its potential unfulfilled: 'Not all the Connexions are made

¹¹⁹ David Cowart. "Attenuated Postmodernism: Pynchon's *Vineland*". *Critique*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Winter 1990), 73. It is worth noting that Oedipa comes to interpret the legacy left to her in *The Crying of Lot 49* as a request that she too should examine the problems besetting the country: 'There either was some Trystero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America' (126). Dugdale suggests that this idea is encapsulated in the title: 'Lot 49' standing for America which is bounded by the 49th parallel (*Thomas Pynchon*, 9).

yet, that's why some of it is still invisible'¹²⁰. Moreover, the construction is still growing in both size and complexity: 'Day by day the Pioneers and Surveyors go on, more points are being tied in, and soon becoming visible, as above, new Stars are recorded and named and plac'd in Almanacks' (772). Mason's vision obviously relates to the creation of the United States, for each state is represented as a star on the national flag and, of course, other states were added to the union as time progressed. Pynchon is perhaps suggesting here that a return to the original vision of the founding fathers is an obvious way in which to start reclaiming many of the values and traditions which have been perverted and emptied of meaning in recent years. Certainly, in his latest two novels, Pynchon seems to have become more optimistic that regeneration and regrowth are possible even as the entropic tide, clearly fostered by the omnipresent forces of consumerism and the mass media, pulls us into the new millennium.

¹²⁰ Interestingly, this image of the stars as a construction also appears in O'Connor's *Wise Blood*: 'The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that look like scaffolding....thousands of stars....as if it were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe' (31).

Chapter 2: Don DeLillo.

‘Consume or die. That’s the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump’ – *Underworld*.

When David Bell, narrator of DeLillo’s first novel *Americana*, introduces himself as a ‘Child of Godard and Coca-Cola’ he is unwittingly describing the protagonists of DeLillo’s novels as a whole, immersed as they all are in the contemporary world of consumerism and the mass media. Bell’s conviction, moreover, that it is the external packaging rather than the commodities themselves that constitutes the main core of our being: ‘My pockets full of scraps of paper, index cards, neatly creased sheets, Scotch-taped fragments....what detritus and joy’¹ also draws our attention to the intrinsic relationship between consumption and waste which is outlined in the above epigraph and reiterated throughout DeLillo’s fiction. This relationship is also a central feature of the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed the two authors share many of the same concerns about and insights into the nature of the contemporary world: both stress the dominance of consumerism and the mass media as moulding social forces and examine the use of various structuring narratives employed by the characters as a means of survival in the turbulence of the present. Rather than merely echoing the concerns raised in the previous chapter, however, I will be focusing on the substantial differences between the authors’ perspectives on contemporary society and the conclusions they draw about the future. These differences can, I believe, be attributed to two main sources. Firstly, the locations in which the novels are set influence their prevailing mood and atmosphere. The ephemeral landscapes of Pynchon’s fiction, ranging from the chaotic ‘Zone’ in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to the dreamlike California of *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*, offer his characters a certain freedom from structure and the possibility of escape from their ordinary lives. The more realistic and harsher setting of DeLillo’s fiction, which generally unfolds either in New York or in the deserts of the South-West, creates a more

¹ Don DeLillo, *Americana* (New York and London: Penguin Group, 1971), 269.

violent and less easily transcended environment. I believe that their differing historical interpretations also contribute to the disparity between their views of the contemporary world. Although closely contemporaneous (Pynchon was born in 1937, DeLillo in 1936), each interprets the legacy of the 1960's in radically different ways. In spite of his disillusionment with the materialist nature of contemporary society, Pynchon appears to retain some degree of faith in the potential of the counter-cultural movement to provide a viable alternative to mainstream politics, for in spite of the failure of the 'Counterforce' in *Gravity's Rainbow* to repel the entropic movements in society, the community spirit displayed by the Californian hippies in *Vineland* represents his greatest source of optimism for the future. DeLillo, on the other hand, writes all of his fiction under the shadow of the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy and the subsequent violence and civil unrest that characterizes the later years of the decade. The fracturing of the old American dreams of civil and familial unity pervades his novels, making them ultimately – in spite of their often humorous and ironic tones – more brutal and pessimistic than Pynchon's. I will return to these points in the course of the chapter. I will begin, however, by examining the presence of the forces of consumerism and the mass media in DeLillo's fictional world.

Like Pynchon, DeLillo is aware of the power wielded by those in charge of the means of production in contemporary society: 'The corporations. The military. The banks. This is the underground network. This is where it happens' (*Great Jones Street*, 232). What is disturbing about DeLillo's portrayal of these forces is the lack of a viable alternative to their power, for whereas the Becker-Traverse families in Pynchon's *Vineland* represented one potential source of resistance, the counterculture has merged with the mainstream to such a degree in DeLillo's fiction that they have become almost indistinguishable. This is best illustrated in *Great Jones Street* which is based almost exclusively on the buying and selling of various products, most notably a package of drugs believed to affect the part of the brain that controls language: 'It damages the cells in one or more areas of the left sector of the human brain. Loss of speech in other words' (255). It is in the fight for these drugs that we see what Johnston describes as: 'The almost seamless meshing of 1960's counterculture with the commercialism it had

formerly opposed², for the tactics employed by both groups in their negotiations with Bucky Wunderlick are identical. In this context it is appropriate that Dr. Pepper, the representative of the Happy Valley Farm Commune, is named after a popular American soft drink, for the once revolutionary counterculture has, as far as DeLillo is concerned, effectively sold out to market forces.

Unlike Pynchon who focuses mainly on the corporations who control the marketplace, DeLillo's primary interest is rather on the effects their immersion in a world of commodities has on his characters. Many of them introduce themselves to us through their clothes. The image-obsessed David Bell in *Americana* frequently runs through his dress: 'I put on a pair of green chinos with slash pockets, my mandarin opium-shirt and Tobruck desert boots. Then I slipped into the stained leather Montana grizzly-hunting studcoat I had just bought at Abercrombie's' (46); while the terrorists in "The Uniforms" are described almost exclusively in terms of what they are wearing: 'He was wearing a red beret, a khaki fatigue jacket and pants, and a pair of combat boots. Bandoliers crisscrossed his chest'³. This relationship between consumerism and violence recurs throughout DeLillo's fiction and is made even more explicit later on in the same story when, after a morning of murder and rape, the terrorists: 'Went into the village and window-shopped all afternoon' (454). The point being made here, as Osteen explains, is that like the counterculture in *Great Jones Street* these 'revolutionaries' are devoted to the capitalism they claim to want to destroy⁴. The reason for this is perhaps that in a world increasingly defined by uncertainty the characters desperately cling to their possessions in the belief that they can shelter them from the external chaos. It is significant that when he is told of his mother's impending death, David Bell immerses himself in a detailed examination of his clothing: 'I was wearing white Top-Siders, white sweatsocks, a pair of olive chinos, and an old basketball jersey, white with blue trim and lettering, bearing the number nine. While we spoke I studied these articles of

² John Johnston, "Generic Difficulties in the Novels of Don DeLillo", *Critique*, vol. 30, no. 4 (Summer 1989), 262.

³ Don DeLillo, "The Uniforms", From Jack Hicks, ed., *Cutting Edges: Young American Fiction For the 70's* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973), 453.

⁴ Mark Osteen, "Children of Godard and Coca-Cola: Cinema and Consumerism in Don DeLillo's Early Fiction", *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 3 (Fall 1996), 448.

clothing intensely' (*Americana*, 168). Bell's bid to keep unwanted emotion at bay is mirrored by Lyle Wynant in *Players* who checks the contents of his pockets with unhealthy frequency in the belief that if he knows exactly where his possessions are his own place in the world is assured: 'Lyle checked his pockets for change, keys, wallet, cigarettes, pen and memo pad. He did this six or seven times a day...It was a routine that required no conscious planning yet reassured him, and this was supremely important, of the presence of his objects and their locations'⁵. The point, as James Axton explains in *The Names*, is that objects comfort us because they define both our abilities and our limits: 'Objects are the limits we desperately need. They show us where we end. They dispel our sadness, temporarily'⁶. In a world increasingly characterized by a lack of structure, the physical presence of one's possessions thus often constitutes the only way in which DeLillo's characters can define their role or place in society. To possess and to consume are thus crucial activities for an integrated and healthy sense of psychological well-being.

This dependence on possessions to insulate one from the terrifying chaos of the postmodern world reaches its ultimate manifestation in *White Noise*, in which the Gladney family, as Saltzman puts it: 'With the urgency of addicts, accumulate material possessions to defend their sense of presence, to lend them personal density and the illusion of spiritual "smugness"'⁷. Jack Gladney describes the relief he feels when his ATM card works, thus validating his status as part of a vast system of consumers: 'Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval' (46). Jack also emphasizes the feeling of security that he and his wife derive from a full carload of groceries, again as if to imply that they will be protected by the sheer weight and plenitude of their purchases: 'It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases...in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls – it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not

⁵ Don DeLillo, *Players* (London: Vintage, 1991), 26.

⁶ Don DeLillo, *The Names* (London: Picador, 1999), 133.

⁷ Arthur M. Saltzman, "The Figure in the Static: *White Noise*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Winter 1994), 812-3.

known to people who need less, expect less' (20). One particularly significant example of this use of consumerism as a protective shield comes when, having been described by a colleague as: 'A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy' (83), Jack embarks on a desperate shopping spree: 'I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake' (84). To borrow a metaphor much favored by Pynchon, Jack has been made aware of the leveling of difference between himself and the rest of the human race and is trying to stave off this entropic progression by immersing himself in the protective embrace of consumerism.

Jack's description of shopping as a life-affirming activity is, of course, ironic given that there is some evidence that the commodities that flood the world of *White Noise* are themselves the main source of the phenomenon that gives the novel its title. The 'dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension' (36) which pervades the supermarket scenes throughout the book reminds us that although consumerism might be viewed by many of the characters as constituting a defense against the external turbulence, its overwhelming presence will ultimately destabilize meaning and reduce the world to a stifling system of unconnected signs and symbols. There is some evidence that human life has already begun to be subordinated to this world of signs. The students who attend the university at which Jack Gladney teaches are introduced solely through their possessions, a fact that troubles Jack although he is not sure why: 'Things, boxes. Why do these possessions carry such sorrowful weight? There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding' (6). An explanation is offered by the narrator of "Baghdad Towers West" who emphasizes that his own psyche was almost destroyed by the weight of his possessions: 'My sole achievements were my possessions....Then, slowly, I began to disappear. I became....no more than my Mercedes 220 SE sedan, no more than my Uberlingen-Sasaki solid-state-receiver FM-stereo component system, no more than my key to the Playboy Club'⁸. Jack Gladney eventually realizes that he is also in danger of becoming suffocated by his possessions and during a period of severe anxiety about his impending

⁸ Don DeLillo, "Baghdad Towers West", *Epoch* (Spring 1968), 205.

death he too begins to divest himself of what he has hoarded over the years: ‘I threw away picture-frame wire, metal book ends, cork coasters, plastic key tags, dusty bottles of Mercurochrome and Vaseline....I was in a vengeful and near savage state. I bore a personal grudge against these things. Somehow they’d put me in this fix. They’d dragged me down, made escape impossible’ (294). Unfortunately DeLillo does not appear to be too optimistic about the potential success of this strategy, for the protagonist of “Baghdad Towers West” gives up his life of consumerism only to spend all of his time in bed – hardly a life-affirming path to take: ‘I had disappeared almost completely and it was wonderful....I slept most of that week’ (205); while the Gladney family are back in the mall by the end of the novel, once again clearly convinced of the recuperative and unifying qualities of contemporary consumerist culture: ‘This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly coloured goods’ (326). In spite of the obvious correlation between the white noise generated by the omnipresence of commodities and the general deathward drive of society⁹, therefore, many of DeLillo’s characters remain convinced that it is only through a wholehearted immersion in consumerism that they can survive in the contemporary world.

One of the main reasons that consumerism fails to deliver as a source of structure for DeLillo’s characters is, I believe, that at its centre is a void, for although many of the novels are ostensibly based on consumerism, the commodities themselves are subordinated to their images and packaging. In other words the characters do not fill their lives with shopping because they actually wish to eat, drink or otherwise use what they have purchased, but rather because they are buying into the aura that surrounds the brand names and advertizing mythology of their favourite goods. This widespread reduction of the real to its representation results in what Baudrillard calls ‘hyperreality’, a world of self-referential signs, wherein the model or representation becomes more real than reality itself (*Fatal Strategies*, 11). This privileging of image or representation is a

⁹ This connection between death and the white noise generated by the signs and images of consumerism and the mass media is made explicit in a conversation Jack Gladney has with his wife: ‘“What if death is nothing but sound?” “Electrical noise....Uniform, white”’ (198).

central theme in *Mao II*¹⁰, where we hear of a Chilean magazine editor imprisoned for publishing caricatures of General Pinochet on the charge of: 'Assassinating the image of the general' (44); and where the recently completed novel of Bill Gray (the commodity) is set to be subsumed into his own image: 'We don't need the book. We have the author....The book disappears into the image of the writer' (71)¹¹. The most extreme example of this submersion of the real into its representation is the astonishing reduction of Hitler and his history of genocide to a mere subject of academic and consumerist interest, the focus of a class taught by Jack Gladney, whose principle theme is the use made of imagery by the Nazi party: 'Advanced Nazism....with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms, three credits, written reports' (*White Noise*, 25). Pynchon was also primarily interested in the iconoclasm of the Nazi movement. However DeLillo goes much further in his undermining of Hitler's reputation as an historical figure by reducing him to a highly marketable commodity. Jack's lack of German, for example, does nothing to threaten his status as an expert in the field as long as he provides the delegates at his conference with appropriately scripted name badges: 'Their names lettered in gothic type' (274). These examples clearly support Baudrillard's claims that the real (the general, the author and Hitler himself) is no longer a necessary feature of a world based on image and representation.

Because the commodity has been reduced so thoroughly to its image or packaging in the postmodern world of DeLillo's fiction, garbage represents the ultimate icon of the consumerist age for it comes full circle from the supermarket to the dump while still retaining the: 'Formal structure and even undiminished colours of the presentation of surfaces'¹². When Jack and Murray meet in the store and compare each other's preferences for different brands of items, therefore, it is on the packaging rather than on the product inside that they focus: 'This is the new austerity....Flavourless packaging. It appeals to me....Most of all I like the packages themselves. You were

¹⁰ Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1991).

¹¹ It is significant that Mao Tse Tung, the very antithesis of capitalism, is himself reduced to a commodity by Andy Warhol, an artist known for his privileging of surface, whose prints of Mao are reproduced on the cover of DeLillo's novel.

¹² John Frow, "The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*", From Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 190.

right, Jack. This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock' (*White Noise*, 18-9). This tendency to reduce a product to its external packaging is echoed in *Underworld*, in which Nick and Marion Shay also base their choice of product on its future potential as waste: 'Saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought....First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product as food or lightbulbs or dandruff shampoo. How does it measure up as waste, we asked' (121). Such is the preoccupation that Nick and the other 'waste theorists' in the novel have with its presence that it begins to intrude on their perception of the world as a whole. Its presence in their minds ranges from the conscious: 'Trouble is, the job follows me. The subject follows me. I went to a new restaurant last week, nice new place, you know, and I find myself looking at scraps of food on people's plates. Leftovers' (283); to the subliminal: 'When people heard a noise at night, did they think the heap was coming down around them, sliding toward their homes, an omnivorous movie terror filling their doorways and windows?' (185). This last description is particularly interesting if we consider that this intrusion of waste into people's nightmares suggests that it is usurping the power traditionally associated by theorists like McLuhan with the mass media.

What is fascinating about the subject of waste in DeLillo is that rather than constituting a mere bi-product of consumerism it has itself become one of the most sought-after commodities, with whole shops dedicated to selling the garbage of movie-stars: 'The actual stuff deep-frozen in a warehouse - you looked in a catalogue and placed an order' (*Underworld*, 319). Moreover, in much the same way as Warhol based his art on ordinary commodities, so too is garbage adapted into contemporary works of art in DeLillo. There are two main artists at work in *Underworld*, Klara Sax and Ismael Munoz (otherwise known as 'Moonman 157'), both of whom are engaged in a similar project. Klara's work involves 'transforming and absorbing junk' (102) by painting two-hundred-and-thirty derelict bombers and using the surrounding desert as a canvas on which to mount them: 'Coppers and ochres burning off the metal skin of the aircraft to exchange with the framing desert' (83). Ismael's artistic mission, on the other hand, is to decorate as many trains as possible with his now legendary tag, a pastime which,

although affording much pleasure to those who witness the passing of his trains, is dismissed by Klara as a: ‘Romance of the ego’ (394) – an accusation somewhat justified by the pleasure Ismael takes in being photographed with his work: ‘Ismael sidled to the open door so that he could be in the picture too, unknown to the man. The man was photographing the piece and the writer both, completely unknown to himself’ (434). This scenario also provides us with another example of the collapsing of the boundaries between real and representation as the artist merges with his art into an image. In fact in spite of Klara’s derision of Ismael, her own work, as she admits elsewhere in the novel, represents a similar attempt to make her mark: ‘Maybe there’s a sort of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct – to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are’ (77). Waste is clearly being employed in these examples to affirm the existence of those who transform it into art. In this context, it is worth remembering that it is also through various forms of art, ranging from graffiti to forgeries, that the underground W.A.S.T.E system in *The Crying of Lot 49* made their presence felt to the uninitiated. Again this could be related to a particular legacy of the 1960’s – namely the connection between alternative political movements and underground art.

Klara’s observation that her art represents a discipline through which she can explore her identity is an important one in the context of this discussion about waste for one of the most significant attributes of the latter – like consumerism itself – is the structure it imposes on the lives of the characters. Detwiler, one of Nick’s colleagues, heralds the consumerist mentality as the: ‘Mandate of the culture’ (287), and points out that by submitting to this mandate we are allowing ourselves to be controlled by it: ‘We let it shape us. We let it control our thinking’ (288). Rather than struggling against this control, however, many of the characters seem to relish the stability it gives them. Nick and Marion Shay, for example, fulfil the weekly classification and division of their garbage with an enthusiasm and a diligence that speaks loudly of its importance to them: ‘There is no language I might formulate that could overstate the diligence we brought to these tasks. We did the yard waste. We bundled the newspapers but did not tie them in twine’ (103). It is noteworthy that Nick’s feelings towards his work: ‘I felt a weird elation, a loyalty to the company and the cause’ (285) are akin to that of a dutiful

son, for it represents a kind of substitute for the father who deserted him when he was young.

If waste provides the characters of *Underworld* with a means of structuring their lives, however, its status as the key to their identities also leaves it open to misuse for it constitutes an important source of manipulation in the realm of public relations. J. Edgar Hoover, the supreme leader in this field, gains much of the information that swells his beloved dossiers from examining his subjects' waste: 'They took the...garbage back for analysis by forensic experts on gambling, handwriting, fragmented paper, crumpled photographs, food stains, bloodstains and every known subclass of scribbled Sicilian' (558). Nor is Hoover alone in his faith in waste as a source of information. His own domestic garbage is also under threat from dissident groups wishing to display it and subject it to all kinds of indecencies: 'They intend to take your garbage on tour...Get lefty sociologists to analyze the garbage item by item. Get hippies to rub it on their naked bodies' (558). The status of waste as keeper of the secret history of humanity also becomes obvious to Jack Gladney as he sifts through his own household's garbage: 'Why did I feel like a household spy? Is garbage so private? Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioural ruts?' (259). The defensiveness many of DeLillo's characters feel about their garbage relates back to a point made earlier: that possession is a crucial aspect of their subjectivity. In other words, they know themselves to exist because they can hold the things they consume. In this, DeLillo anticipates the psychological anxieties of Ellis' characters, who desperately surround themselves with the brand names and designer labels through which they believe their identities can be defined.

As well as representing a potential form of control over one's enemies, waste is also intrinsically connected by DeLillo to the larger world of weaponry. *Underworld* abounds with examples of the convergence between the atomic bomb, which is one of the central presences of the novel, and common domestic materials. A radio DJ instructs his listeners in the art of making explosives using only domestic ingredients: 'You

could make your own napalm by mixing one part liquid detergent Joy with two parts benzene or one part gasoline. Shake vigorously' (603); while a company advertizing lawn fertilizer attempt to cash in on this mind-set as part of their marketing campaign: 'The creative types here in the shop wanted to do a Bomb Your Lawn Campaign. A little twist on the fact that these fertilizer ingredients, plus fuel oil, could produce a rather loud disturbance if ignited' (528). Above all else, ordinary domestic waste is cited as the 'mystical twin' of modern weaponry because they constitute an increasingly serious threat as their bi-products multiply underground. The problem of contaminated waste has become so serious that - with extremely questionable wisdom - nuclear explosions are being used in an effort to destroy it, a measure that results in the: 'Fusion of two streams of history, weapons and waste' (791). In fact, according to some sources, the threat from the bacteria breeding on human waste has now exceeded that posed by nuclear bombs: 'Weapons utilizing pathogenic bacteria could be every bit as destructive as megaton bombs' (557). This wresting of control from its traditional strongholds is dramatized in relation to J. Edgar Hoover who may have been able to use one type of waste to his advantage but grows increasingly powerless in the face of his obvious terror of its bacterial bi-products. Germ-obsessed Hoover lives in constant fear of the invisible multitudes of germs in the surrounding environment, and goes so far as to make provisions for his continuing insulation from insidious bacteria even after death: 'To protect his body from worms, germs, moles, voles and vandals....Lead-lined, yes, to keep him safe from nuclear war, from the Ravage and Decay of radiation fallout' (577-8). Ridiculous though this is, I believe that it points to an interesting trait shared by the majority of DeLillo's characters: namely their need to find something that can give their lives a sense of structure and purpose. Hoover's excessive precautions against germs, after all, is not so different to the ways in which the Gladney family try to insulate themselves from the perils of the external world with their bags of shopping. Although bacteria and consumerism represent forces that pull the characters towards the 'white noise' of death, therefore, they retain a dominant and privileged presence in their lives.

The irony about the representation of consumerism and waste in DeLillo's fiction is that in spite of their obvious failure to provide the characters with a viable, life-affirming structure, they continue to be regarded with a kind of mystical awe. The strongest sense of religious transcendence in *White Noise*, for example, is located in Steffie's solemn chanting of the brand-name 'Toyota Celica' which strikes her father as: 'Beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder....How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence?' (155). It is of course a possibility, as Maltby points out, that DeLillo may be mocking traditional faith in the visionary moment or even questioning the very possibility of such moments in a postmodern culture¹³. Certainly the description of the child's chant as: "Gold-shot with looming wonder" would appear to be heavily ironic. On the other hand, the simple manner in which the incident is relayed could suggest that DeLillo is allowing for the possibility that Jack might indeed be enjoying a genuine: 'Moment of splendid transcendence', an indication perhaps that postmodern phenomena can still have moments of modernist epiphany attached to them. Similarly, when Nick and his co-workers in *Underworld* speak of their landfills in tones of reverent adoration: 'Waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread' (88), it is again difficult to ascertain whether DeLillo is being ironic. Certainly waste, as I discussed in relation to Pynchon, represents a potential alternative to the repressive mainstream. Whereas Pynchon's waste includes those echelons of society normally confined to the margins, however, DeLillo's generally refers only to the decomposing mass of the landfill. The constant parallels he draws between these landfills and the atomic bomb: 'There is a curious connection between weapons and waste....Maybe one is the mystical twin of the other' (791) suggests that they are far more likely to threaten the human race rather than represent the means of our salvation. It is worth bearing in mind that the V-2 Rocket in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* was also regarded by many characters as a transcendent force, when in fact it was the ultimate instrument of destruction of a death-based regime. In spite of the support

¹³ Paul Maltby. "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo". *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 260-1.

DeLillo's characters appear to derive from their immersion in a world of consumerism and waste, therefore, I am inclined to regard the signs and symbols generated as contributing to, rather than reducing, the entropic white noise of the surrounding environment. Given that *Underworld* ends, after a section devoted to the Internet, on the word "Peace", however, it is impossible to be sure.

David Bell's description of himself as a 'Child of Godard and Coca-Cola' is also an appropriate introduction to the next section of this chapter, which will examine the presence of the mass media in DeLillo's fiction. Bell's declaration could in fact be applied to the author himself whose first response when asked to name some of his influences was to cite not a novelist but a filmmaker: 'Probably the movies of Jean-Luc Godard had a more immediate effect on my early work than anything I'd ever read'¹⁴. The prevalence of the mass media throughout his fiction has resulted in his being nominated 'The poet laureate of the media' by one critic¹⁵. The influence of the media on DeLillo's writing manifests itself in a number of ways. Besides Bell's quotation which is a parody of a placard that appears in Godard's movie *Masculin féminin*, the French avant-garde filmmaker also provides the inspiration for a number of DeLillo's short stories, including "Baghdad Towers West" which derives its plot from *Masculin féminin*, and "The Uniforms" which is based on *Weekend* and unfolds to the back drop of: 'A Godard film...playing at the local cinema' (459)¹⁶. Some of DeLillo's writing also owes a debt to filmic techniques. While he was writing *Americana*, a novel which has a movie as its subject matter, he kept in mind: 'The strong image, the short ambiguous scene, the dream sense of some movies, the artificiality, the arbitrary choices of some directors, the cutting and editing. The power of images'¹⁷; while the first scene of *Players* is composed almost entirely of a description of a movie being shown aboard a plane: 'The long lens picks out a man and woman standing at the top of a small hill. More bass chords. Accumulating doom' (7). Far more important than

¹⁴ Quoted in Osteen, 439.

¹⁵ Arnold Weinstein, *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self and Place in American Fiction From Hawthorne to DeLillo* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 301.

¹⁶ See Osteen, 443, 446.

¹⁷ Quoted in Osteen, 439.

the ways in which DeLillo experiments with styles and techniques derived from the media, however, is his demonstration of the close relationship between media and identity in contemporary America. This section of the chapter will examine the influence of the media¹⁸ on DeLillo's characters and the ways in which they use them both to define their own identities and to structure the surrounding environment. I will begin by examining these issues in a general way, before focusing on a number of specific movies that feature in the texts.

The intrinsic connection that DeLillo sees as existing between television and the American imagination is encapsulated, according to Lentricchia, in two scenes from his novels¹⁹. The first is the belief expressed by David Bell in *Americana* that the invention of America is synonymous with the invention of television for the desire to become the 'universal third person' is shared both by the contemporary consumer slumped in front of the television set and by the original pilgrims who arrived dreaming of reinventing themselves in the new world. Whereas advertizing exploits this American dream of the ideal consumer, therefore, he has existed in the American consciousness since the country was founded: 'Advertizing discovered the value of the third person but the consumer invented him. The country itself invented him. He came over on the *Mayflower*' (271). DeLillo returns to this image in *Libra* where Marina's arrival in America is dramatized by her appearance on a close-circuit television in a shop window: 'It was the world gone inside out. There they were gaping back at themselves from the TV screen' (227). Although frightened, Marina is also fascinated by her transformation into an image and is unable to stop looking at herself: 'She was compelled to look....She kept walking out of the picture and coming back. She was amazed every time she saw herself return' (227). The significance of this episode, as Lentricchia points out, is that it condenses the entire American story that began on the *Mayflower* with the spiritual invention of television and that concludes in the electronic society of real television where: 'The romantic third person of the pilgrims...is literally

¹⁸ Given that DeLillo does not differentiate between film and television to the same extent as Pynchon – in fact the high incidence of home-movies in DeLillo effectively collapses the boundaries between the genres – I will be discussing both components of the mass media together in this chapter.

¹⁹ Frank Lentricchia, "Don DeLillo", *Raritan*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Spring 1989), 4-6.

imagined as ourselves on television’²⁰. DeLillo’s assertion that the invention of America is connected to the invention of television means that only those whose lives are validated by television are its true citizens.

The second scene which, according to Lentricchia, is of seminal importance to DeLillo’s representation of media-saturated America is the visit made by Jack Gladney and Murray Siskind to ‘the most photographed barn in America’ in *White Noise*. What is important to realize, as Murray points out, is that tourists do not come to see the barn itself but rather to take part in the media spectacle that has blossomed around its status as the ‘most photographed barn’: ‘We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura’ (12). The real has thus been abolished for just as history in Baudrillardian terms has disappeared into the sensationalism of news, so too has the barn been subsumed completely into its own representation: ‘What was the barn like before it was photographed?... We can’t answer these questions because we’ve read the signs.... We can’t get outside the aura’ (13). Significantly this proclamation is delivered by Murray not with nostalgia for a more authentic past but with great pleasure: ‘He seemed immensely pleased by this’ (13). Murray’s lack of concern about this increasing colonization of every aspect of life by the media is perhaps attributable to a consensus shared by many of DeLillo’s characters that the real has been destabilized to such an extent that only its representations are now available. David Bell’s confession that he married his wife primarily because they looked so photogenic together: ‘The distances between them absolutely right so that the whole scene obeyed an abstract calculus of perspective and tone, as if arranged for the whim of a camera’ (*Americana*, 30) is perhaps not quite so ridiculous or ironic in this context.

One of the characters in *Underworld* wisely proclaims that: ‘There is only one truth. Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world’ (530). The validity of this statement is borne out by the number of characters who depend on the media to instruct them about the appropriate emotional responses to events. In *White Noise*, for example,

²⁰ Frank Lentricchia, “*Libra* as Postmodern Critique”. From Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 207.

public anxiety regarding the toxic spill is directly proportional to the gravity of the words used by the media to describe it. While it is still designated a 'feathery plume' (111), the characters are not too worried; when this is corrected to a 'black billowing cloud' they are almost relieved, believing that this more accurate description must mean that the authorities are on top of the situation: 'That's a little more accurate, which means they're coming to grips with the thing. Good' (113); when this becomes the 'Airborne Toxic Event', however, the characters react to the menace inherent in the words: 'He sensed the threat in state-created terminology' (117) and evacuate the area immediately. Also notable is Heinrich's refusal to let himself be guided by the rain obviously falling outside the car, relying instead on the radio to validate its presence for him: ' "It's going to rain tonight".... "It's raining now".... "The radio said tonight"' (22), - a scenario anticipated in *Americana*: 'When it rained Sullivan put on her old buttonless trenchcoat even though we were inside the camper' (204). This reliance on the media is further illustrated in *Players* where Pammy Wynant finds herself unable to grieve for the tragedy that has befallen one of her closest friends until she sees a similar scenario unfold on television, whereupon she becomes: 'Awash with emotion....Then it came, onrushing, a choppy sobbing release' (205)²¹. More worrying than this relatively conscious use of the media as a guide for behaviour are the examples DeLillo gives of the suggestive, and even hypnotic, powers of the television. In *Underworld*, we hear of a woman from Normal, Illinois who contracts the illnesses and diseases of celebrities: 'Through some odd form of neurohypnosis....this woman....showed the symptoms of whatever illness Elizabeth Taylor was suffering at a particular time, or John Wayne, or Jackie Onassis....It was the modern stigmata' (378); while in *White Noise*, the Gladney daughters work their way through a series of the side-effects reported to follow exposure to the toxic spill: 'At dinner Denise kept getting up and walking in small stiff rapid strides to the toilet off the hall, a hand clapped to her mouth' (117). Worrying though this is, their father seems bizarrely to be most concerned about the fact that the

²¹ Pammy's situation is comparable to Sam's. in Mason's *In Country*, who likewise grieves for her father only when she has been prompted by an episode on the television: 'Each time she saw that episode, it grew clearer that her father had been killed in a war' (25).

girls do not show all the symptoms in the order prescribed by the media: 'She and Denise had been lagging all evening. They were late with sweaty palms, late with nausea, late again with *déjà vu*. What did it all mean?' (125). This last example illustrates that Jack Gladney is perfectly happy for his daughters to submit to the persuasive powers of the media, as long as they do it in the prescribed manner. The wisdom of allowing them to be controlled to such a dangerous extent is clearly not an issue in a world in which all aspects of life, including one's health and illnesses, are conditioned and determined by the media.

As the examples discussed above clearly indicate, the mass media are a dominant force in the novels of DeLillo. As well as impeding on the lives of his characters in a general way – through the advertizing slogans and mores that they internalize, for example – some of the novels focus on a number of specific movies, both real and fictional. At the centre of *Running Dog* is a home-movie thought to feature an orgy in Hitler's bunker during the last days of the Third Reich. As it happens, the footage is not of a pornographic nature. Instead it shows Hitler imitating Charlie Chaplin's famous send-up of himself in *The Great Dictator*: 'He produces an expression, finally – a sweet, epicene, guilty little smile. Charlie's smile. An accurate reproduction'²². Although a great disappointment to the characters who were hoping to become rich through their discovery of an erotic movie starring Hitler, this footage is of seminal importance to the subject of the postmodern undermining of the real which I have discussed above, for by imitating Chaplin's imitation of himself, Hitler has collapsed the boundaries between the real and its image and is existing simultaneously both as himself and as his own representation.

One of the movies discussed in *Underworld* also relates to the Nazi period and is comparable to the work of Fritz Lang, which dominates Pynchon's imaginary landscape in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The movie in question is an old Eisenstein creation called *Unterwelt*. The fact that its title is the German equivalent of the novel's is immediately striking, but even more crucial is its depiction of the underworld to which it refers. Its

²² Don DeLillo, *Running Dog* (GB: Picador, 1992), 236.

subject appears to be the horrifying experiments carried out on prisoners in some nameless underground prison: 'Other victims appeared, muscles and bones reshaped, slits for eyes, shuffling on stump legs' (429). Two things strike Klara Sax, one of the onlookers, about these scenes: Firstly, the deformities displayed by the victims are uncannily like those caused by nuclear fall-out: 'Was Eisenstein being prescient about nuclear menace?' (430); and, secondly, the horror of the footage is reminiscent of that shown at movie drive-ins during the 1950's, when both movies and their spectators were very much aware of the overhanging threat of atomic warfare: 'These were movies for the drive-ins of the fifties, a boy and a girl yanking at each other's buckles and snaps while the bomb footage unfurls and the giant leeches and scorpions appear on the horizon' (430). This connection between the threat posed by the bomb and the public hunger for horror movies is a well-documented characteristic of the Cold War period in America, as DeLillo points out in an interview: 'It's (the Cold War period) inevitably associated not just with danger but with popular culture'²³. Like Pynchon, DeLillo clearly believes that including some 'footage' from old movies in his novels gives them an air of authenticity. This inclusion also underlines the faith invested by these authors in the power of the image as a signifying presence.

The most interesting of the movies included by DeLillo in his fiction are two home movies that emphasize not only the blurring of boundaries between the genres of film and television, but also illustrate the wide-reaching effects that the mass media have on the American psyche. The first of these is video footage recorded by a child, in *Underworld*, of a freeway shooting by a mythical figure known as the Texas Highway Killer. This tape is replayed on television throughout the novel and holds endless fascination for its audience: 'You don't usually call your wife over to the TV set. She has her programs, you have yours. But there's a certain urgency here. You want her to see how it looks....You want her to be here when he's shot' (158). Even the killer himself is intrigued, if somewhat wary, of the power of the recording: 'He was suspicious of the tape because it had a vista different from his experience and he kept thinking the girl was going to move the camera and get him in the picture' (270). The

²³ DeLillo interview with Fintan O'Toole, 5.

way in which this footage enters the public consciousness is, of course, easily comparable to the media coverage of the assassination of President Kennedy, an event which was also endlessly replayed and watched. It is appropriate that this historical moment, which is often hailed as marking the start of the contemporary television culture, is also represented in *Underworld* in the form of the bootlegged and secret Zapruder footage which a group of artists watch both sequentially and frame-by-frame (488). The interesting point about the Zapruder movie is, of course, that certain vital frames are missing – frames that might clear up the mystery still surrounding the President's death. The loss of these frames, ninety-two in all, is one of the main reasons, according to DeLillo, that both the movie and the assassination itself have come to be regarded as the source of so much uncertainty: 'Valuable things have been learned – distances, locations, rates of speed. But in the end, the film has become our major emblem of uncertainty and chaos. The powerful moment of death, the surrounding blurs, patches and shadows'²⁴. Given that the assassination is probably best known (certainly by younger generations) as a media spectacle, it is appropriate that DeLillo's Oswald is also represented primarily as a creation of the media, whose own death and its simultaneous transmission to every household in America, is an indication perhaps that this pawn of the media is now being subsumed by the forces that created him. I will be returning to the question of Oswald's narration by various external forces later in the chapter. Before leaving the issue of the mass media, however, I want to look briefly at the overall effects their prominent position has on the world represented in DeLillo's fiction.

As I have illustrated, both consumerism and the mass media are held in high esteem by the vast majority of DeLillo's characters who look to them for structure and guidance in an increasingly chaotic world. It is no coincidence that the void left by the postmodern dismantling of many traditional grand narratives, such as religion, is generally filled by one of these forces. In *White Noise*, for example, Murray Siskind likens a trip to the mall to a kind of spiritual rebirth: 'This place recharges us spiritually....It's full of psychic data' (37); while, in *Underworld*, Matt Shay declares

²⁴ Don DeLillo, "American Blood", *Rolling Stone* (8 December, 1983), 24.

that the cinema is: 'A thousand times more holy than church' (407). As was demonstrated in relation to consumerism, however, it is not clear that the structure offered by the mass media is a beneficial or life-affirming one. David Bell makes a very interesting observation in *Americana* when he draws our attention to the disparity between the amount of holes on the mouthpiece (thirty-six) and the earpiece (six) of a telephone (96) – a phenomenon that clearly indicates a decrease in genuine communication: after all, if everyone is talking, no one can be listening. Baudrillard insists that this decrease in communication is attributable to television, which by virtue of its mere presence ensures that: '*People are no longer speaking to each other* (or, as David Bell observes, *listening* to each other), that they are definitely isolated in the face of a speech without response' (*For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 72). This tendency for television to be a personal rather than a shared experience is illustrated throughout DeLillo's fiction in the embarrassment experienced by characters forced to do their viewing in a communal setting. In *Players*, Lyle refuses to allow Pammy to sit with him because: 'It made Lyle nervous.... There was something private about television. It was intimate, able to cause embarrassment' (40). His reluctance is shared by Marion Shay, in *Underworld*: 'I guess I knew what she meant, that another's presence screws up the steady balance, the integrated company of the box. She wanted to be alone with a bad movie and I was standing judgement' (116); and illustrated in the discomfort suffered by the Gladneys during their Friday-night ritual of watching television as a family: 'The evening in fact was a subtle form of punishment for us all. Heinrich sat silent over his egg rolls. Steffie became upset every time something shameful or humiliating seemed about to happen to someone on screen' (*White Noise*, 16). As these examples indicate, DeLillo appears to agree with Baudrillard's assertion that the mass media isolate people from each other and undermine personal and familial relationships.

Although the embarrassment displayed by some of the characters is funny, Bell's observation about the disparity in the number of holes in the mouthpiece of the telephone does have some serious connotations. It refers, for example, to the overabundance of communicational devices in contemporary society, the ironic

consequence of which has been to make real communication impossible. The reason for this, as I discussed in relation to the novels of Thomas Pynchon, is that society has become saturated with sounds and images to such an extent that language itself has been cheapened and undermined: Pynchon's characters often become so swamped by the information they are attempting to order that they become disorientated and confused. It is no coincidence that DeLillo's original title for *White Noise* was 'Panasonic', a word that would emphasize the stereophonic nature of television's verbal and visual onslaught²⁵. It is worth bearing in mind one of McLuhan's aphorisms which states: 'Silence is all the signs of the environment at once'²⁶. The implication is that the mass media, along with the omnipresent signs and symbols of consumerism, are the main generators of the white noise that characterizes DeLillo's fictional world and that drives it ever closer to its demise.

The indubitable Heinrich is quick to remind his family that as well as its representation of death through footage of various natural and chemical disasters, television also operates as an entropic force in as much as it contributes physically to the increasing radiation present in our environment: 'Forget spills, fallouts, leakages. It's the things right around you in your own house that'll get you sooner or later....There are scientific findings. Where do you think all the deformed babies are coming from? Radio and TV, that's where' (175). DeLillo's principle focus, however, is on the sense of dislocation and confusion often fostered by its representations and images. One particularly poignant episode in *White Noise* is Babette's unexpected appearance on television teaching one of her classes. Jack describes the initial 'confusion, fear, astonishment' experienced by the watching members of the family: 'A strangeness gripped me, a sense of psychic disorientation', until realizing that her class was being broadcast, they were able to regain their sense of a distinction between the image on the television screen and their own reality: 'It was only as time drew on, normalized itself, returned to us a sense of our surroundings, the room, the house, the reality in which the TV set stood - it was only then that we understood what was going

²⁵ Douglas Keeseey, *Don DeLillo* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 8.

²⁶ *The Marshall McLuhan Dew-Line Newsletter*, vol. iv.

on' (104). This conviction that the boundaries between reality and representation are sustainable in the media-saturated world of the present may, according to Ferraro, be too confident. The scene ends with Wilder's distress at the disappearance of the image he has taken simply to be Babette, signifying perhaps the danger that the television is mediating all experience. If the chapter had concluded with the reappearance of the flesh-and-blood Babette, Jack might have left us with a sense that danger has been averted and that regeneration is at hand. Leaving us with Wilder's tears, however, appears to be a warning that: 'Our acts of recovery against image narcosis may (one day soon) come too late'²⁷. Ferraro's assessment suggests that the white noise generated by the multiple transmissions and energies of the electronic media are indeed behind what appears to be a general death-ward drive of society.

There is another way in which this scene can be interpreted, however. Jack's faith that the boundaries between reality and representation can indeed be reinstated in the face of impending chaos brings the focus onto the dichotomy between modernism and postmodernism, which some critics believe is at the centre of the novel. Wilcox's description of Jack as: "A modernist displaced in a postmodern world" (348) is particularly appropriate in this context because it aligns Jack's worry that traditional boundaries are being disestablished with a modernist desire for structure. In sharp contrast to his father, Wilder, who fails to acknowledge or even understand the differentiation between Babette and her image, is a symbol of the postmodern future. His lack of anxiety about, and casual acceptance of the dismantling of traditional rules and conventions is one of the reasons his parents regard him as the source of their salvation and security: 'He doesn't know he's going to die.... You cherish this simpleton blessing of his, this exemption from harm' (289). I will discuss this idea that Jack's interaction with his children represents a kind of dialogue between two conflicting systems of belief at greater length towards the end of the chapter.

In the first half of this chapter, I have examined the presence of the forces of consumerism and the mass media throughout DeLillo's fiction and concluded that they

²⁷ Thomas J. Ferraro, "Whole Families Shopping at Night!" From Lentricchia, ed., *New Essays on "White Noise"*, 27-8.

influence every aspect of the characters' lives and the surrounding environment. The characters themselves adopt a variety of strategies in order to survive in such a world. Their reactions can be divided into two distinct, although not mutually exclusive, categories: those who endeavour to escape from the ever-proliferating images and signs by purifying themselves and regressing to a time when something that resembled genuine meaning was still attainable; and those who throw themselves wholeheartedly into the pursuit of patterns and narratives in a bid to impose some structure and order on the surrounding chaos. In the concluding half of the chapter, both strategies will be investigated and their efficacy determined.

Characters belonging to the first category – those who wish to escape from their media-ridden society by divesting themselves of all structures – appear throughout DeLillo's novels. Their main aim is to achieve an inner state of tranquillity. One of the ways in which they strive to accomplish this is by moving from various cities, which represent maximum chaos, to areas of America associated with space and relative peace. David Bell, for example, decides to abandon his high-powered career and travel westwards in order to discover: 'An authentic origin, a core identity, a genuine passion'²⁸. Many of Bell's co-characters follow his lead and search for environments that appear to offer them relief from the media circus that characterizes contemporary life. Gary Harkness' quest, in *End Zone*, is for the 'end zone' that gives the novel its title. He frequently flees from the codified nature of his life as an athlete, finding solace in the surrounding desert: 'The sun. The desert. The sky. The silence'²⁹; In *Great Jones Street*, Bucky Wunderlick abandons his life as a 'hero of rock 'n' roll' (1) in order to re-evaluate his life in private: 'Beyond certain personal limits, in endland, far from the tropics of fame' (4); while in *Underworld*, Nick and Matt Shay leave their home in the Bronx and move into the 'white space' (the uncharted, uninhabited areas) on the map (451). It is interesting to note that this progression from the city to the empty spaces of the desert recurs throughout DeLillo's fiction, from *Americana* (1971) to *Underworld* (1997), particularly since DeLillo often undermines these supposedly liberating

²⁸ Osteen, 450.

²⁹ Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1986), 89.

journeys by drawing our attention to their failure to provide his protagonists with a life-affirming environment in which to re-evaluate their lives. The dangers inherent in David Bell's image-based life in New York pale in comparison to his effective kidnapping and near rape in the Texan desert (373); while Bucky Wunderlick's mission of self-discovery is reduced to an aimless existence in bed: 'The bed was a vast welcoming organism, a sea culture or synthetic plant, enraptured by the object it absorbed....I headed deeper into mists' (142). Perhaps most significant of all is the comparison that can be drawn between the scorched landscape of *End Zone* and the Los Alamos bomb testing site in the New Mexico desert³⁰ This comparison is made explicit not only within the novel itself, where references to nuclear warfare and mass destruction abound: 'I became fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability, post-attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, spasm war' (21); but also in *Underworld*, in which Matt Shay recollects a popular rumour about one of the 'white spaces' through which he is travelling: 'He recalled something Eric Deming had told him about this part of Arizona, a rumour, a sort of twilight zone story about people known as sensitives....There was a secret facility near the Mexican border where sensitives were tested and experiments carried out' (451). Given this systematic undermining of the 'end zones' where the characters expect to find peace from the turbulence of the external world, it is clear that DeLillo does not regard these environments as life-affirming or conducive to better self-understanding. In this context, it is unclear why he continues to send his characters to the deserts in search of a means of escape from dominating structures.

The tendency of the characters to withdraw from heavily populated areas is all part of a wider movement towards 'purity', a state they believe they will achieve when they divest themselves of societal structures and conventions. David Bell's filmic representation of his past, although ostensibly an attempt to recover memories, could equally be interpreted as an attempt to destroy them and to make him 'colourless' by intertwining scenes from his past with the 'white noise' of contemporary television and

³⁰ Christian K. Messenger, *Sport and the Spirit of Play in Contemporary American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 273.

advertizements. The very title of the novel, as Osteen points out, is suggestive of a pastiche of assorted images and tones: '*Americana* is presented as a collagelike assortment of images and mementoes that incorporate generic and structural models derived from diverse literary and cinematic sources' (458). In postmodern terms, pastiche is, of course, indicative of a depthlessness and a loss of meaning³¹. Bell's bid to withdraw from the identity forced upon him as a consequence of his high-powered job is echoed by the main protagonists of *End Zone*, *Great Jones Street* and *Mao II*, all of whom are trying to disentangle themselves from the public mythologies into which they have been thrust: Gary Harkness, the 'modern athlete as commercial myth' (*End Zone*, 3); Bucky Wunderlick, the 'hero of rock 'n' roll' (*Great Jones Street*, 1); and Bill Gray, the mysterious, hermetic author, who: 'Doesn't go anywhere else, except to hide from the book he's doing' (*Mao II*, 24). I will look briefly at some of the escape strategies adopted by these characters.

Harkness' life as a footballer is extremely ordered and disciplined, each day rigidly structured by a strict training routine and by his coach's voice which, as Keeseey remarks, is the: 'Controlling principle of the little universe inhabited by the players on the team' (*Don DeLillo*, 34). Unable to satisfy himself with these empty words, however, Harkness embarks on a program of abstinence and denial in the hope that he might find: 'Some form of void, freed from consciousness' in which the mind could remake itself (89). He begins by denying himself meat: 'I decided not to eat meat for a few weeks' (31); before extending his fast in imitation of the purification process undergone by Sioux warriors before they set off to war: 'The Sioux purified themselves by fasting and solitude. Four days without food in a sweat lodge. Before you went out to lament for your nation, you had to purify yourself' (200). His eventual refusal of all food is described by DeLillo as constituting a retreat from all of the things that give our lives structure: 'He goes on a hunger strike. He isn't protesting anything or reacting to anything specific. He is paring things down. He is struggling, trying to face something

³¹ Jameson, for example, defines postmodern pastiche as: 'Blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs' ('Postmodernism'), 65.

he felt had to be faced. Something nameless³². Harkness' collapse and subsequent hospitalization: 'In the end they had to carry me to the infirmary and feed me through plastic tubes' (242) suggests that his method of purification is too extreme and that an existence completely free from any structure or external input (in this case from food) is untenable, and leads to total passivity and possibly even death.

Harkness is not the only character in the novel who attempts to free himself from the conventions of ordinary life. His girlfriend, Myna, mirrors his attempt in her own battle against beauty, which she views as a dangerous trap: 'It's hard to be beautiful. You have an obligation to people. You almost become public property' (67). Her solution is to make herself as unattractive as possible, thus avoiding this attention: 'She weighed about 165 pounds. Her face had several blotches of varying size and her hair hung in limp tangled clusters. She bit her nails, she waddled' (66). Also notable, are the efforts made by two of his team-mates to cut themselves off from their respective ancestries. Taft Robinson attempts to escape from the connotations of his status as a black quarterback by locking himself in his precisely furnished room, where he hopes to lose himself in the structure with which he has surrounded himself: 'I've got this room fixed up just the way I want it. It's a well-proportioned room. It has just the right number of objects. Everything is exactly where it should be' (238). Bloomberg is also trying to cut himself off from his history and heritage, this time by 'unjeweling' himself. The most effective way of doing this, he believes, is by changing his accent and use of language: 'I try to speak in complete sentences at least ninety-five percent of the time. Subject, predicate, object. It's a way of escaping the smelly undisciplined past with all its ridiculous customs and all its craziness - centuries of middle European guilt and anxiety. I want to think clearly' (186). The consensus among the characters of *End Zone* is thus that it is only by divesting themselves of all defining characteristics and becoming interchangeable that they will manage to avoid the intrusive attentions of the contemporary media-ridden world. What is apparent, however, is that all they succeed in doing is exchanging one oppressive form of cultural narrative for another. Myna

³² DeLillo Interview with LeClair. From Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffrey, eds., *Anything Can Happen* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 83.

realizes, for example, that her wholehearted attempts to escape the conventions and strictures of beauty have caused her to buy into the stereotypical image of unattractiveness, and that she is thus still enslaved: 'I was just moping along like an unreal person....I never really faced my own reality. I was satisfied just consuming everything that came along' (227). *End Zone* is a novel, therefore, about the powerlessness of its characters to write their own narratives of subjectivity in defiance of a culture that is determined to condition and define them.

In many ways, as Keesey points out, *Great Jones Street* picks up where *End Zone* left off, with the main protagonists in both novels attempting to remove themselves from society in an attempt to find some space away from the mass media (*Don DeLillo*, 48). Bucky Wunderlick is generally believed to have been based on the figure of Bob Dylan, whose preoccupation with freedom, according to Aidan Day: 'Expressed itself most obviously as a desire to overcome or transcend many of the edges or boundaries - the limiting conventions and rules - of mainstream American culture'³³ - views also ostensibly shared by members of the Happy Farm Commune, whose professed motto is to: 'Return the idea of privacy to American life' (*Great Jones Street*, 16). The origins of Bucky's final withdrawal from public life can be traced through his music, which evolves from a violent, noisy challenge to the system, to an increasingly meaningless and introspective babble, culminating in the infantile chant of 'Pee-pee-maw-maw' (106). It is interesting to note that DeLillo himself describes Wunderlick and his different types of 'noise' as epitomizing the evolution of American society as a whole during that period: 'The interesting thing about that particular character is that he seems to be at a crossroad between murder and suicide. For me, that defines the period between 1965 and 1975....I thought it was best exemplified in a rock-music star'³⁴. This is an important statement for a number of reasons. Firstly, it draws our attention once more to DeLillo's interpretation of the political legacy of the 1960's, in particular his oft-expressed belief that the murder of President Kennedy in 1963 constituted the end of a period of American history characterized by hope and

³³ Aidan Day, *Bob Dylan: Escaping on the Run* (Lancashire: Wanted Man, 1984), 7-8.

³⁴ DeLillo Interview with DeCurtis, "The Product", 371.

optimism: 'I think we've all come to feel that what's been missing over these past twenty-five years is the sense of a manageable reality. Much of that feeling can be traced to that one moment in *Dallas*'³⁵. More importantly in the context of the present discussion, however, it emphasizes that the tendency among many of DeLillo's characters to escape from America's cities to her 'blank spaces' has many precedents in American culture: ancient Native American tribes, like the Sioux, and musicians, like Dylan, have expressed the same desire to rid themselves of the repressive narratives and structures of the dominant culture. The fact that the most repressive of these narratives, the language of the father as represented by Coach Creed and by patriarchal mythologies which define Bloomberg as a Jew and Myna as an overweight, and thus necessarily unattractive, woman, is also significant because it relates to a dominant American literary theme: that of the Frontier. As Atwood explains: 'In American literature, the family is something the hero must repudiate and leave; it is the structure he rebels against, thereby defining his own freedom, his own Frontier'³⁶. In their attempts to escape from the structures of a dominant, patriarchal society, therefore, DeLillo's characters are, in a sense, conforming to yet another stereotype: that of the American literary hero.

There are two aspects common to all of the quests undergone by the various protagonists wishing to free themselves from what they feel are repressive and limiting societal structures by divesting themselves of their identities. The first is the unilateral emphasis placed on language as a means through which this liberation can be achieved. Two of the novels introduce us to drugs that are designed to disestablish the signifying power of language. The drug at the centre of *Great Jones Street* affects the side of the brain that controls language, with the result that the person who takes it is no longer able to speak: 'You'll be perfectly healthy. You won't be able to make words, that's all' (255). Wunderlick greatly enjoys the sense of liberation from the repressive relationship between words and their meanings afforded to him, albeit temporarily, by the drug: 'I was unreasonably happy, subsisting in blessed circumstance' (264). Its counterpart in

³⁵ DeLillo Interview with DeCurtis. From Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 48.

³⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, Ltd., 1972), 131.

White Noise is Dylar, a drug designed to remove one's fear of death. Although it fails in this aim, it also affects one's relationship with words. While the drug taken by Wunderlick destroys the connection between the object and its name, Dylar reinforces it to such an extent that the utterance of a phrase is as real as the action being described: ' "Plunging aircraft", I said, pronouncing the words crisply, authoritatively. He kicked off his sandals, folded himself over into the recommended crash position, head well forward, hands clasped behind his knees' (309). Divergent though the effects of the two drugs might be, they both result in the transcendence of the strictures of everyday life through language: the one by severing all connection between signifier and signified, the other by reinforcing their relationship to such a degree that they become interchangeable and thus meaningless.

The second common feature of the protagonists' search for purity is that their withdrawal from society is often linked to a delving into their childhood memories. In other words, it appears to be necessarily regressive. David Bell's movie, for example, is primarily an exploration of his youth, for he believes that if he could only complete the 'Long unmanageable movie full of fragments of everything that's part of my life' (205), he could perhaps: 'Get it straightened out in my head' (205) and thus move on. Bell's return to his childhood is mirrored by Bucky Wunderlick, whose infamous 'Pee-pee-maw-maw' chant (106), which marks the first steps of his regression, is reminiscent, according to Keeseey, of a baby's first words 'pa' and 'ma'. Bucky, therefore, could be trying: 'To call into being a loving world more truly responsive to his needs', for according to philosophers: 'A return to the familial roots of language can indicate an attempt to go back to the source of thought itself, to a time before society imposed its own cruel logic on the mind' (*Don DeLillo*, 53). An observer at the mass wedding with which *Mao II* opens comments on the happiness and relief radiating from the young couples as they pledge themselves to their leader: 'The terrible thing is they follow the man because he gives them what they need. He answers their yearning, unburdens them of free will and independent thought. See how happy they look' (7). If this unburdening is the goal towards which so many of DeLillo's characters strive, then the inference is obvious: this kind of 'freedom' can be achieved only in the absolute absence of

freedom. This paradox, as Day observes, was clear to Bob Dylan who spoke of the fact that a drive to freedom could often lead one only to ‘*Generate* new forms of confinement’. His song *My Back Pages*, for example, describes how: ‘In the manner of his attempt...to test the boundaries of one system, he had contracted himself to the restricted and restrictive terms of another’³⁷. In much the same way, the danger about the attempt made by his counterpart in *Great Jones Street* to undermine the very structure of language, first with his meaningless babbling and then with his experimental drugs, is that his silence could be taken to represent a tacit approval for the system. This is a concern voiced by Opel: ‘If you want to go back out as a Los Vegas version of what you were, fine with me except I hope you know what it is you’re doing. You’ll lose the perspective and the edge will crumble and you’ll really become the other thing’ (88). It is vital to remember, as Lentricchia emphasizes, that in relation to the fiction of DeLillo, ‘plotlessness’ does not mean the same thing as lack of plot³⁸. In other words, although the characters may appear to be divesting themselves of contemporary controlling structures by retreating from the conventions of language, beauty and other narratives, they are nevertheless, as I have illustrated, still subject to their guiding principles. DeLillo’s characters, therefore, cannot escape from these structuring narratives, but can merely exchange one for another.

The overwhelming evidence from the material discussed above is that the process of purification undergone by many of DeLillo’s characters is an impossibility in a world so fully under the control of the forces of consumerism and the mass media. David Bell’s attempt to delve into his past in order to escape from the contemporary world of images and signs can only be achieved through cinematic representation – an indication, according to Osteen, that the pursuit of pure origins is itself a clichéd movie image: ‘A piece of Americana available for consumption’ (466); Bucky Wunderlick and Babette Gladney take highly suspect drugs; Gary Harkness becomes seriously ill; and Bill Gray actually dies in his bid to escape from the identity being forced upon him by

³⁷ Bob Dylan, 17. Each verse of Dylan’s song ends with the rueful refrain: ‘Ah, but I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now’. *My Back Pages*. From Bob Dylan, *Lyrics: 1962-1985* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 209-210.

³⁸ Lentricchia, “Tales of the Electronic Tribe”. From Lentricchia, ed., *New Essays on “White Noise”*, 97.

the media. Of course given the privileging of representation above reality in the postmodern world, Gray's personal assistant is correct in his assumption that his disappearance can never be truly permanent, as he will live on through his myth: 'The novel would stay right here, collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill's legend, undyingly. The nice thing about life is that it's filled with second chances. Quoting Bill' (224). This mirrors the way in which Oswald is reconstituted as a media creation after his assassination, both in real life and in *Libra*, as illustrated in his renaming: 'Whenever they took him down, he heard his name on the radios and TVs. Lee Harvey Oswald. It sounded extremely strange. He didn't recognize himself in the full intonation of the name' (416). Even death, as I will discuss in greater detail below, has thus become so mediated by the forces of consumerism and the mass media that it no longer offers an escape from their intrusive presence. Attempts to regress to their childhoods is similarly doomed for, as Murray Siskind points out, children do eventually grow up, lose their insight and become consumed by their simulacra-filled society: 'Once you're out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity' (*White Noise*, 50). In the light of these failures, it is clear that another means of asserting the self will thus have to be sought.

A recurring theme throughout DeLillo's novels is the sense that a secret pattern underlies and even determines the lives of the characters. Its existence is felt, for example, by Jack Gladney amidst the commotion of the shopping-mall: 'I realized the place was awash in noise....And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension' (*White Noise*, 36); and described by David Ferrie as the 'third line', which grows out of: 'Dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self', and forces a connection between seemingly unrelated events: 'It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny' (*Libra*, 339). Unlike some of the characters discussed above, who opt to bow out of the

system in order to try to assert their identities³⁹, those who sense the existence of these secret patterns strive to submerge themselves completely in them. Jack Gladney believes, for example, that it is only by becoming one with the structures and images of society that he can safeguard his existence: 'I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance....The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate....Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval' (*White Noise*, 46). Gladney's conviction is mirrored by Oswald who, in the letter to his brother which is reproduced in the Prologue to *Libra*, speaks of his own desire to merge with the patterns of history, believing that this is the only way in which he will be fulfilled: 'Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general'. This insight could be attributed to the dramatic changes that have characterized the postmodern world, in which the linear causality of the Newtonian universe appears to have been replaced by Baudrillard's simulacrum, in which the distinction between observer and observed, subject and object, or even reality and representation, is no more. Although this structureless state may seem to be the ideal longed for by the characters discussed in the previous section, the majority are obviously reluctant to embrace the formlessness offered by this new world. Day's description of the disjunction between Bob Dylan's professed yearning for freedom from stricture and his: 'Self-restraining anxiety at the thought of losing all form' (*Bob Dylan*, 27) could also be applied to many of DeLillo's characters who are obviously very dependent on the links and patterns that they formulate through a variety of strategies which I will now discuss.

Given that DeLillo is well known for his emphasis on language as the identifying feature of contemporary life⁴⁰, it is no surprise to find that language also constitutes one of the primary ways in which his characters narrate their positions in the world to themselves. The subworld of the football players in *End Zone* is ruled by

³⁹ As I noted at the beginning of this section of the chapter, these categories are not mutually exclusive: some of the characters dabble with both methods in a bid to protect their identities.

⁴⁰ Johnston claims that DeLillo's primary interest is in modern jargons and the power they have to define and order (263); while Weinstein insists that his novels are based on the understanding that language is the 'Urgrund', the ultimate stage on which a society or culture lives and goes through its antics and rituals (290).

Coach Creed whose status stems primarily from his role as the 'name-giver' to the various sequences of play. Such is his authority, in fact, that: 'No play begins until its name is called' (118). A similar situation is illustrated in *White Noise* where the reaction of the public to the Airborne Toxic Event, as I illustrated above, is proportional to the different words used by the media to describe it. What is continually emphasized throughout DeLillo's fiction is that as well as controlling the public, certain words can also reassure and comfort them. In *Underworld*, DeLillo's nostalgic retrospective on the 1950's, the old familiar brand-names and advertizing slogans are used as a kind of comforting mantra: 'In a country that's in a hurry to make the future, the names attached to the products are an enduring reassurance. Johnson & Johnson and Quaker State and RCA Victor' (39). The need for this linguistic connection with the past is also demonstrated by the demands made of the comedian, Jackie Gleason, to perform not new and original material, but his familiar, well-loved routine: 'My mother liked the familiar things best. The more often he used a line, the more she laughed. She waited for certain lines' (106). Nick Shay first becomes aware of the mythical properties of language when he is sent to a Jesuit school as part of a judicial correction process. His teacher – appropriately a priest and thus responsible for Nick's later faith in language – convinces him that access to true knowledge is available only to those who strive to achieve linguistic control: 'You don't see the thing because you don't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names' (*Underworld*, 540). This belief is echoed in *Running Dog* by Mudger who insists that: 'You couldn't use tools and materials well...unless you knew their proper names' (119). Nick therefore embarks on a life-long mission to master language, teaching himself and his children the proper names for the minutest aspects of everyday life: 'A hawser is a rope that's used to moor a ship. Or, The hump in the floor between rooms, I used to say. This is called the saddle' (102). He revels in discoveries such as: 'Residents of Phoenix are called Phoenicians' (120), strongly believing that it is through his knowledge alone that he will be able to distance himself from his past: 'This is the only way in the world you can escape the things that made you' (543). For Nick Shay at

least, the mastery of language represents a way to rise above the misfortunes of his past and steer his way through the chaos of the present.

Given the power invested by many characters in words and language, the benefits of achieving linguistic control are obviously huge. This is illustrated by Hoover's quick command of the news about the Soviet nuclear test: 'By announcing first, we prevent the Soviets from putting their own sweet spin on the event.... People will understand that we've maintained control of the news if not of the bomb. This is no small subject of concern' (*Underworld*, 28); and by the failure of attempts to defeat Mao Tse Tung: 'In China the narrative belonged to Mao.... So the experience of Mao became incorruptible by outside forces' (*Mao II*, 162). For the same reasons, the penalties of losing linguistic control include isolation and powerlessness. The dyslexia from which Soviet tests revealed Oswald to have suffered⁴¹, for example, bars him from access to the codes and knowledge he believes will allow him to participate in the real world and condemns his search for a network of connections that would include himself to failure. It is interesting to note that Hitler, as Jack Gladney points out, experienced a similar difficulty with regard to the German tongue: 'Wasn't Hitler's own struggle to express himself in German the crucial subtext of his massive ranting autobiography, dictated in a fortress prison in the Bavarian hills? Grammar and syntax. The man may have felt himself imprisoned in more ways than one' (*White Noise*, 31). In spite of these troubles, however, neither Oswald nor Hitler lost faith in the transcendent power of the word, for even before they achieved their fame they were regularly committing their thoughts to paper in the belief that these records, Oswald's 'Historic Diary' and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, would someday justify their existences. Again, language is seen to be paramount in the constitution of identity.

Jack Gladney, who has also failed to master the German tongue, attributes his difficulties to its impenetrable essence: 'The basic sounds defeated me, the harsh spurting northernness of the words and syllables, the command delivery' (*White Noise*, 31). Rather than despising the language, however, Jack reveres it precisely for its

⁴¹ See Norman Mailer, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (US: Random House, Inc., 1995), 370.

inviolability, which he believes is the source of its power: 'I sensed the deathly power of the language. I wanted to speak it well, use it as a charm, a protective device' (31). A similar belief underlies the school-course taken by some of the students in *End Zone* on the 'untellable', an experimental course designed to delve below language in search of a basic and original truth (181). It is significant that one of the conditions of entry into the course is that the students must have no prior knowledge of the German language, for it is on the sounds, rather than on the meanings of the words that they are focusing. The reason German is revered by some of DeLillo's characters is thus because they believe it is invested with some protective power. It is noteworthy that Gladney first immersed himself in German culture during a year noted for its turbulence and violence: 'I invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968' (4). Given that this was less than a month after the Tet offensive in, it is likely that DeLillo is drawing our attention here to the psychological need experienced by many Americans at the time to immerse themselves in something they felt had the power to protect them from external events. Jack's choice of Hitler as a figure large enough to fulfil this role is explained by Murray Siskind: 'Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you' (287) – a situation that also suggests why so many Germans, depressed and humiliated by years of economic hardship, also clung to the vision of strength and success offered by Hitler. Of course given that Hitler's mission was the promotion of death rather than of life, it is inevitable that Jack's quest should also lead him towards violence. Appropriately, the horror he feels after his attack on Willie Mink in Germantown leads to his immersion in the other great buffer of post-1968 America: shopping. It is significant that as well as the groceries with which he fills his shopping cart, Jack also peruses the racks of tabloids that line his progression towards the checkouts: 'Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead' (326). In spite of his experience in Germantown, therefore, Jack is obviously still convinced that his salvation lies in his immersion in the words, the codes, the systems and the structures of the contemporary consumer culture.

Jack's belief in the protective power of certain words is also illustrated by his decision to name his son 'Heinrich Gerhardt' in the belief that its solidity might offer him some protection in the future: 'I thought it had an authority that might cling to him. I thought it was forceful and impressive and I still do. I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid' (63). Nor is he alone in his conviction that one's name can thus influence one's identity. Chess, a member of the Happy Valley Farm Commune in *Great Jones Street*, emphasizes that names can have an almost Pavlovian effect on character, encouraging people to act in certain ways: 'People act in response to their names' (250)⁴². Jack Gladney's wisdom in selecting the enduring name Heinrich for his son is further underlined in DeLillo's play *The Day Room*, in which one of the characters believes that his own name has destined him for an early death: 'It's not an old man's name. We don't last that long. Something happens if you're a Gary, fairly early on'⁴³. Such is the awe in which DeLillo's characters hold their names that they often reverse the traditional relationship between signifier and signified, regarding themselves as the function of their names rather than vice versa. Shlomo Glottle, one of the characters in *Ratner's Star*, who is often consulted about the origins and meanings of people's names, explains that the basis for such enquiries is that people believe an understanding of their names can teach them something about themselves: 'People ask about their names in an attempt to add to their self-knowledge'⁴⁴ (154). In much the same way, when characters wish to distance themselves from the past and forge a new identity, one of the first things they do is change their names. In *Underworld*, for example, Klara's father cuts himself off from his European roots by changing the German-sounding 'Sachs' to the more ambiguous 'Sax': 'What a distance he sought to travel from the grating sound of that *c-h* with its breadth of reference, its guttural history and culture, those heavy hallway smells and accents – from this to the unknown *x*, mark of mister anonymous' (483). Oswald, the central figure in *Libra*, is, of course, the master of assumed names and identities, his past littered with a variety of aliases. Most significant

⁴² The example Chess gives of two of his employees who are named Spot and Rex and thus unable to prevent themselves exhibiting canine behaviour makes this reference to Pavlov explicit.

⁴³ Don DeLillo, *The Day Room*, *American Theatre* (September 1986), 8.

⁴⁴ Don DeLillo, *Ratner's Star* (London: Vintage, 1976), 154.

is his use of 'Hidell', derived perhaps from 'hide 'L' (Lee)', a name that he believes can shield him from external scrutiny: 'He wasn't sure he knew exactly what the id was but he knew it lay hidden in Hidell' (101). Oswald is no doubt adhering to the theory expounded by one of the cultists in *The Names* that a secret name represents a way out of his problematic life: 'A secret name is a way of escaping the world. It is an opening into the self' (210). Unfortunately for Oswald, however, his use of so many different names seems to destabilize his psyche to such an extent that in death he becomes subsumed into the media-created: 'Lee Harvey Oswald' (416). The fact that his favourite alias, Hidell, also contains the words 'Die and hell' (440), suggests that his violent death, thus preordained by his name, was inevitable.

The use of names to order and structure the world reaches its fulfilment in *The Names*, where the ritualistic murders carried out by the cult members could be regarded as constituting a determined attempt to use language – the alphabet itself in this instance – to structure life. In this context, the murder of a human being in a place bearing the same initials could be considered a life-affirming, rather than a destructive, act. Owen Brademas' theory is that this neat connection between location and victim is representative of an attempt to forge a sense of pattern on the world in order to block out their fear of the surrounding chaos: 'Perhaps they fear disorder....They may have felt they were moving towards a static perfection of some kind....To be part of some unified vision. Clustered, dense. Safe from chaos and life' (116). This is a sentiment with which Brademas himself can sympathize for, as he explains: 'I feel I'm safe from myself as long as there's an accidental pattern to observe in the physical world' (172). This idea that it is better to find oneself in the middle of a vast, if bizarre and threatening, conspiracy than alone and unnarrated is one which I discussed at length with regard to Pynchon's protagonists. It is also articulated by James Axton who emphasizes the horror he would feel if what he believes is a well-organized cult turned out to be nothing more than a string of coincidences: 'I want to believe they plotted well. I don't like thinking I was the intended victim. It puts all of us at the mercy of events' (328). At the end of the day, however, the attempts made by the cult to draw meaning and insight from their actions are redundant, for in the self-referential world of

the postmodern no simple connection between signifier and signified is possible, and the killings serve only to mock this disjunction: 'These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls....They intended nothing, they meant nothing. They only matched the letters' (308). Moreover the self-referential nature of the cult: 'Cults tend to be closed-in, of course. Inwardness is very much the point' (116) suggests that what DeLillo is describing is a closed circuit whose progress can only be towards extinction. Although Axton's final offering to the Acropolis is: 'Not prayer or chant or slaughtered lambs' but *language* (331), therefore, the evidence seems to suggest that its use as a means of ordering our lives is effective only on a very superficial level. In spite of the faith expressed by many of DeLillo's characters in language as a means of constituting their identities and structuring their surrounding environments, therefore, the evidence suggests that it has become emptied of significance in the postmodern world and is no longer any more than a closed system of signification.

If words thus fail to invest society with the deep sense of order and meaning necessary to illuminate our existence, there is widespread support and faith among DeLillo's characters in the ability of numbers to better fulfil this task. The suitability of numbers to 'save' American society stems, according to David Bell, from the integral role they continue to play in the make-up of the country: 'The whole country runs on numbers....Everybody has numbers. Everybody is a number' (*Americana*, 121) - a sentiment echoed by Lyle Wynant in *Players*, who hails the American Stock Exchange as the ultimate monument to order and organization: 'There were rules, standards and customs. In the electronic clatter it was possible to feel you were part of a breathtakingly intricate quest for order and elucidation, for identity among the constituents of a system' (28). As long as the numbers add up and the stock sheets are balanced, the general feeling seems to be that control, order and stability will reign.

Given the tendency towards superstition displayed by many of DeLillo's characters, it is hardly surprising that numbers are often believed to shape, rather than merely explain, reality. The novels abound with instances of incredible numerical coincidence. We are told, for example, of the countless manifestations of the number

thirteen in the days and events surrounding the historic baseball game recounted in *Underworld*: ‘The next day I think it was I began to see all sorts of signs pointing to the number thirteen. Bad luck everywhere....It was the date of the game. October third or ten-three. Add the month and the day and you get thirteen....Branca wore thirteen’ (95); ‘Isotope (of uranium) has the mass number two three eight. Add the digits and you get thirteen’ (122). Oswald, the ‘negative libran’ whose life seems very much controlled by numerology, also relates the string of seeming coincidences that have characterized his life: ‘October and November were times of decision and grave event. He arrived in Russia in October. It was the month he tried to kill himself. He’d last seen his mother one year ago October. October was the missile crisis. Marina left him and returned last November. November was the month he’d decided with Dupard to take a shot at General Walker. He’d last seen his brother Robert in November’ (370). There are two important points I want to make about Oswald’s concentration on these facts. Firstly, he uses numbers to connect himself to the wider history of his country: he includes the missile crisis among all the events that happened within his family during October. Secondly, by emphasizing his entrapment within this system, he implies that his assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963 was a consequence of the ‘decision and grave event’ characterizing this month rather than of any personal choice or action. If Oswald is to be believed, numbers had become sufficiently powerful to influence the very course of history itself. It is important to remember here that numbers also constitute a language. This numerical language is, therefore, also used to control, order and systematize a world that appears to be without structure.

As if these examples were not enough to convince us of the integral role played by numbers in the structuring of the lives of his characters, DeLillo presents us with *Ratner’s Star*, a novel he himself describes as: ‘Almost all structure. The structure of the book *is* the book....A book which embodied pattern and order and harmony, which is one of the traditional goals of pure mathematics’⁴⁵. As we are repeatedly reminded throughout the novel, mathematics represent the: ‘Pursuit of connective patterns and

⁴⁵ DeLillo Interview with DeCurtis. From Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 59.

significant form', and offers: 'A manifold freedom...in the very strictures it persistently upholds' (13). The central role occupied by numbers in our lives stems, according to little Billy Twillig, from one undeniable fact: 'Mathematics made sense' (13). The world of *Ratner's Star* is thus based on the premise - similar to that of Owen Brademas in *The Names* - that the world *is* comprehensible: 'A plane of equations, all knowledge able to be welded, all nature controllable' (64). Although this hope might have been sustainable in the past, however, in the present self-referential world of simulation and signs, flooded as it is with coincidences like those surrounding the number thirteen in *Underworld*, so easy and convenient a conclusion seems improbable. In fact, what happens, as Molesworth observes, is that such obsessive interest in numbers inevitably isolate the characters and lead to their exile from the human world: 'Might involve us in a network of paranoia and control that would effectively dehumanize us rather than provide us with a fulfilling sense of human purpose'⁴⁶. Owen Brademas' similar warning that such faith in numerical or linguistic patterns can alienate one even further: 'This is my vision, a self-referring world, a world in which there is no escape' (297) is borne out by characters, such as Oswald, who becomes trapped within the series of coincidences he initially believes will be his salvation. In spite of their apparent potential, therefore, numbers, on which many of DeLillo's characters depend to provide them with an insight into their world, are more likely to have the opposite effect of isolating them even further. Numbers, then, are simply another cultural language of structure and control.

Although both language and numbers have been discredited as sources of the structure and control so desperately sought by DeLillo's characters, they nonetheless continue to search for an underlying pattern to their lives. One way in which they manage to find such a pattern is through their widespread immersion in games. McLuhan is among those to cite games, which he describes as: 'Collective social *reactions* to the main drive or action of any culture', as the principle source of the structure needed to adjust to the stress of the contemporary world. As extensions not of

⁴⁶ Charles Molesworth, "DeLillo's Perfect Starry Night". From Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 147.

our private, but of our social selves, he explains, games represent situations which have been: 'Contrived to permit simultaneous participation of many people in some significant pattern of their own corporate lives', thus giving us the practice necessary for a confident journey through life⁴⁷. DeLillo himself also emphasizes the sense of security which the rigid structure and rules of a game can impose on a chaotic life: 'People leading lives of almost total freedom and possibility may secretly crave rules and boundaries, some kind of control in their lives. Most games are carefully structured. They satisfy a sense of order'⁴⁸ - a quality that becomes increasingly necessary as the world continues to flood with apparently random and unconnected signs and images. Indeed in complete opposition to those who search for an existence outside the structures of society, the belief expressed by some of DeLillo's characters is that the stricter and more oppressive the rules, the better for everybody: 'Strict rules add dignity to a game' (*Ratner's Star*, 334). It is for this reason that Harkness glories in the patterns and set-pieces that characterize football: 'The afternoon went by in theoretically measured stages, gliding, and I moved about not as myself but as some sequence from the idea of motion, a brief arrangement of schemes and physical laws abstracted from the whole. Everything was wonderfully automatic, in harmony, dreamed by genius' (*End Zone*, 62). The panic felt by all the members of his team as the season draws to a close: 'I began to worry seriously about the fact that the season was nearly over....Without football there was nothing, really and absolutely nothing, to look forward to' (156), underlines their reliance on the boundaries and sense of discipline imposed on their lives by this most structured of games.

The source of the structure that characterizes football is both numerical and linguistic, for each play is numbered and occurs only when it has been announced: 'No play begins until its name is called' (*End Zone*, 118). In his own mid-novel address to his readers, DeLillo explains that the appeal of football for many of its spectators lies in its capacity to create the illusion that order based on words and numbers is possible: 'Football, more than any other sports, fulfils this need. It is the one sport guided by

⁴⁷ *Understanding Media*, 235, 245.

⁴⁸ DeLillo Interview with Le Clair. From LeClair and Larry McCaffery, eds., 81.

language, by the word signal, the snap number, the colour code, the play name.... Here is not just order but civilization' (112). The wisdom of DeLillo's insight into the suitability of football as a guiding structure for modern life is echoed by Real who draws our attention to a number of integral similarities between the two: The basic aim of the football team is to win property (ground) by competition, a goal that is also at the heart of capitalism; football is as segmented temporally as the firings of a piston engine or the sequential read-outs of a computer; and, finally, the organization of personnel in professional football is almost a caricature of the discipline of a modern corporate military-industrial society⁴⁹. When we consider moreover how lucrative a business professional football has become, it is clear why it is such an appropriate metaphor for contemporary society.

Of course devoted though the characters in *End Zone* are to the discipline and sense of purpose bestowed on their lives by the game - Bobby Luke, for example, is: 'Famous for saying he would go through a brick wall for Coach Creed.... The words were old and true, full of reassurance, comfort, consolation' (53-4) - it is not clear that the structure it offers them is in any way beneficial. Many of them subscribe to the homophobia and racism traditionally associated with such enclaves of masculinity: they are suspicious of Taft Robinson, the black quarterback who joins the team: 'My teammates seemed sullen at the news. It was a break with simplicity, the haunted corner of a dream, some piece of magic forest to scare them in the night' (5); and become obsessed with a rumour that there is a homosexual in their midst: 'We have to figure out what to do and pretty damn soon. There are guys walking around here naked right now. It could be any one of them' (155). Messenger also emphasizes the de-individualizing nature of the game: the players are so well hidden behind their helmets and other protective clothing that they become impossible to tell apart (261). Coach Creed's repeated instruction that the players should strive to subordinate themselves to the team: 'Oneness was stressed - the oneness necessary for a winning team' (19) is perhaps one of the reasons Harkness feels obliged to take such drastic action to preserve his own

⁴⁹ Michael R. Real, "The Super Bowl". From Newcomb, ed., *Television*, 223-5.

identity at the end of the novel. Having been written or narrated for so long by the plays, he now seeks to write himself.

The most concerted attack on the idea that football provides contemporary man with a good example of how he should approach life comes in the form of its repeated connection with nuclear warfare. Harkness and Robinson, the two star players, are obsessed with the stories of mass death and destruction: 'I liked reading about the deaths of tens of millions of people. I liked dwelling on the destruction of great cities....A thrill almost sensual accompanied the reading of this book' (20-1). Messenger points out that the movement of a football game, which is from assigned positions to a collision of bodies in a pile-up, is symbolic of nuclear war which is also based on atoms seeking collision (306) – a connection DeLillo appears to make explicit in his setting of the novel in a desert landscape with strong associations with the Los Alamos bomb testing site in New Mexico (273). It is significant that baseball, the other national American sport with which *Underworld* opens, is similarly divested of much of its claim to offer transcendence from ordinary life by its close associations with war. The story of the historic game shared the front page of *The New York Times* with news of the Soviet explosion of a nuclear weapon – a dichotomy DeLillo claims is what inspired him to write the novel in the first place⁵⁰. Even more telling is the revelation by Marvin Lundy that the baseball and the atomic bomb share certain characteristics: 'When they make an atomic bomb, listen to this, they make the radioactive core the exact same size as a baseball' (172). Once again, a structure in which many of the characters believe they will find the discipline and the order needed to help them survive amidst the chaos of the contemporary world, is revealed instead to be a harbinger of death and destruction.

In spite of the obvious failure of games, linguistic and numerical conventions to provide DeLillo's characters with the structure they need to navigate their way through the turbulence of the postmodern world, they retain their faith in the idea that life is indeed underlined by an endless series of interconnecting narratives and patterns, the

⁵⁰ DeLillo Interview with O'Toole. 5.

discovery of which will be their salvation. Oswald's main quest throughout *Libra*, for example, is not at all the part he is to play in the assassination of President Kennedy, but rather to find his place in the world by becoming a part of its history: 'He feels he is living at the centre of an emptiness. He wants to sense a structure that includes him, a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs' (357). That the structure he eventually becomes part of is a conspiracy is really not all that surprising, for as Moll Robbins, the journalist in *Running Dog*, observes: 'This is the age of connections, links, secret relationships....World-wide conspiracies. Fantastic assassination schemes' (111). In fact what is most fascinating about Oswald is the extent to which his entire life appears to have been the subject of manipulation by one force or another, a fact encapsulated in Lentricchia's observation that the central question posed in the novel is not: 'Who is Oswald' but rather: 'Who or what is responsible for the production of Lee Harvey Oswald'⁵¹. The most obvious source of manipulation is, of course Win Everett, who along with his co-conspirators take it upon themselves to create the figure of the lone gunman who will be a pawn in their attempt on the life of the President. What is significant, however, is that in spite of their meticulous preparations the real Oswald is far larger in life than the figure they had scripted: 'It was no longer possible to hide from the fact that Lee Oswald existed independent of the plot' (178)⁵². Oswald is himself aware of the attempts made by his mother to mould his character: 'She was always there, watching him, measuring their destiny in her mind. He had two existences, his own and the one she maintained for him' (47) – efforts she continues even after his death when she tries to absolve him from blame for his actions by drawing attention to the environmental obstacles he had had to overcome: 'This boy slept in my bed out of lack of space until he was nearly eleven and we have lived the two of us in the meanest of small rooms' (11). The fact that he was exposed to a number of assassination movies, such as Sinatra's *Suddenly* (369), shortly before his own

⁵¹ Frank Lentricchia. "Libra as Postmodern Critique". From Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 203.

⁵² The 'sensation of eeriest panic' experienced by Win when he comes face-to-face with his creation (179) is reminiscent of the confusion felt by Pynchon's filmmaker Von Goll when his fictional creation, the Schwarzkommando, also turn out to be a reality (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 275-6).

attempt on Kennedy's life suggests that, like John Hinckley, Oswald's actions could be interpreted as a direct result of his powerful exposure to particular media narratives.

What is most significant about Oswald, however, is the degree to which he appears to have been under surveillance by various security forces for much of his adult life. In his biographical study *Oswald's Tale*, Mailer produces significant evidence, including transcripts from the KGB, which imply that Oswald's apartment in Minsk was under constant scrutiny – surveillance that was taken over by American security agencies when he returned home. So numerous were these manipulative forces that Oswald the man has, as Mailer remarks, all but disappeared as a historical presence: 'Given the variety of interpretations that surround him, he has continued to exist among us as a barely visible protagonist in a set of opposed scenarios' (197). Mailer's evidence is particularly interesting in the light of Lentricchia's assertion that the question of who was responsible for the production of Lee Harvey Oswald is inseparable from the question of where DeLillo imagines power to lie in contemporary America⁵³. The generally accepted view that Oswald was most likely a pawn in a larger conspiracy⁵⁴ justifies the long-held suspicions of many Americans that the greatest danger to their autonomy comes from within their own country, rather than from any traditional overseas foe. Major Staley's remark that: 'I'm afraid of the United States of America....If anybody kills us on a grand scale, it'll be the Pentagon. On a small scale, watch out for your local police' (*End Zone*, 159-60) echoes fears expressed by many contemporary American writers, including Pynchon and perhaps most famously Heller, and exacerbated by evidence that all aspects of life are increasingly being monitored.

If Oswald's life, and indeed death, represents his usurpation by a larger force, then this is a fate also in store for Nicholas Branch, CIA historian of the assassination, whose original aim is to impose a coherent order upon the masses of documents and photographs that have accumulated around the investigation: 'He sits in the data-spew of hundreds of lives. There's no end in sight' (15). His problem obviously stems from

⁵³ Lentricchia, "Libra as Postmodern Critique". From Lentricchia, ed. *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 203.

⁵⁴ Interestingly, support for this theory, as DeLillo points out in "American Blood", is on the increase, for while roughly seventy percent of Americans asked in 1964 believed Oswald had acted alone, another poll taken in 1970 showed that eighty percent now believed there was a conspiracy (28).

his belief that he can force the data into a linear narrative based on cause and effect. Of course given the nature of the postmodern world, such a neat imposition of order is impossible, and, like Oswald, Branch is inevitably subsumed by the larger narrative and drawn into the investigation himself: 'He knows he can't get out....Of course they've known it all along. That's why they built this room for him, the room of growing old, the room of history and dreams' (445). In this context it is perhaps inevitable that DeLillo's novel, although specifically written as a fictional text, should itself also be pulled into the vacuum that has grown around the assassination: 'Inevitably some people reviewed the assassination itself, instead of a piece of work which is obviously fiction'⁵⁵. DeLillo's faith in the redemptive powers of fiction: 'I think fiction rescues history from its confusions....So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it – correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don't encounter elsewhere'⁵⁶, thus appears to be overly optimistic given the unilateral collapse of the boundaries between fact and fiction that characterizes the postmodern world.

In spite of the apparent failure of *Libra* to disentangle itself from the larger narrative surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy, DeLillo appears to retain his faith in the narrative as a structuring force. His most recent publication *Underworld* presents us with a number of interlocking narratives, or 'underworlds', in which the main protagonist, Nick Shay, immerses himself. What is significant about Nick is that like Oswald he feels isolated from his past, primarily because his family was deserted by his father when he was young: 'I didn't know if I accepted the idea that I had a history' (511). In much the same way as Oswald (albeit using less dramatic and destructive means), therefore, Nick submerges himself in a variety of narratives which he believes can give his life a sense of stability. The most obvious of these narratives is the mythology surrounding the baseball – the tangible symbol of the historic home run – which is pursued by a number of characters desperate to forge a link between themselves and their past. Nick himself is explicit about his need to revisit the past for

⁵⁵ DeLillo Interview with DeCurtis. From Lentricchia. ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 50.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 65.

he believes that the bad luck with which he has been cursed since Branca made his fateful pitch can make sense to him only when he gets possession of the ball: 'It's the only thing in my life that I absolutely had to own...To commemorate failure. To have that moment in my hand when Branca turned and watched the ball go into the stands – from him to me' (97). It is as if from that moment the hardships and misfortunes suffered by Nick in his youth had already been ordained, and the rest of his life was conditioned accordingly.

Nick's obvious, although possibly unconscious, use of the narrative of the ball as a way of avoiding or escaping from responsibility for the way his life has unfolded is also apparent in his relation to the other narratives that form the various 'underworlds' of DeLillo's novel⁵⁷. I have already discussed his obsessive interest in his work as a waste disposal expert, and emphasized that what his work offers him is a sense of security and belonging: 'In the bronze tower I looked out at the umber hills and felt assured and well defended, safe in my office box and my crisp white shirt and connected to things that made me stronger' (119). As well as providing Nick with a shield against his memories of his absent father, who I will discuss towards the end of the chapter, his work also shelters him to some degree from the other great spectre that overshadowed the lives of his entire generation: the atomic bomb. Just as the importance of the baseball stem from its ability to forge connections between people and their past, so too, according to Hoover, does the 'genius of the bomb' lie not only in its technological wonder but in the multitude of secrets it inspires: 'For every atmospheric blast, every glimpse we get of the bared force of nature, that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert – for every one of these he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein' (51). It is no coincidence that Matt Shay, struggling like his brother to come to terms with his father's desertion, also buries himself in his work as a 'consequence analyst' (401) – his mathematical investigations into nuclear accidents representing an opportunity to provide answers for at least one area of his life.

⁵⁷ The fact that the disappearance of his father is at the root of the void at the centre of his life, means that his immersion in these various narratives is easily comparable to that of Oedipa Maas who submerged herself in the signs and symbols of the Trystero in order to avoid thinking about the death of her ex-husband and the apparent threat posed by his vast corporation Yoyodyne, Inc.

That fear of the bomb was a significant part of the American consciousness is apparent in the 'curriculum of fear' taught by Sr. Edgar to her students as she relentlessly drilled them in the mechanics of a potential emergency: 'She wanted to make sure they were wearing their tags. The tags were designed to help rescue workers identify children who were lost, missing, injured, maimed, mutilated, unconscious or dead in the hours following the onset of atomic war' (717). Surprisingly, there is a certain insistence among DeLillo's characters that frightening though their bomb-shadowed youths may have been, the presence of such a threat was also what gave their lives focus and a sense of stability. Lundy, for example, is adamant that the end of the Cold War and its predictable hostilities was only the beginning of America's nightmare: 'You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It's the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin' (170). This is a point of view echoed by Klara Sax, who also bemoans the chaos and lack of referentiality of the world since its great source of order was dismantled: 'Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck' (76). The reason these characters appear so reluctant to let the Cold War go is not, of course, because they dread peace, but rather because they believe that the definable, easily locatable 'Great Terror' associated with the Soviet Union will be replaced by a multitude of lesser, more hidden and thus deadlier terrors: 'She feels weak and lost. The great Terror gone, the great thrown shadow dismantled....All terror is local now' (816). The end of the Cold War, therefore, heralds not the banishment of the enemy, but rather its evolution into a number of different personae, ranging from the international: 'The Vietcong, the Viet Minh, the French, the Laotians'; to the local: 'The monks, the nuns, the rice farmers, the pig farmers, the student protestors and war resisters and flower people' (612). The outraged response to a fairly unoriginal and outdated gasoline commercial in which the performance of two competing brands was compared: 'White car versus black car. Clear implication. US versus USSR' (529) not from the Soviets but rather from the Congress of Racial Equality condemning the victory of the white car (530) is but one example of the splintering of loyalties in contemporary America. Moreover, the fact that

the dependable KGB has been replaced by the less easily detected - and thus less easily contained or defeated AIDS (243) - suggests that the situation is worsening.

The point made in the previous paragraph that the Cold War era, for all its tension and anxiety, represents a period of history revered by many Americans for its simplicity, can be related to DeLillo's own motives for writing his latest novel. In an interview, he admits that it was his rediscovery of the front page of *The New York Times* for the fourth of October 1951, on which the victory of the Giants and the Soviet explosion of a nuclear weapon appear side-by-side, which first drew him to the subject and inspired him to draw these seemingly diverse narratives together into a kind of inner, private history of the Cold War itself from 1951 to the early 1990's, a period in which 'paranoia replaced history in American life' and the post-war unity was lost forever⁵⁸. DeLillo's endeavour to recover the sense of harmony and solidarity that characterized the 1950's in order to assimilate the atrocities of more recent decades: 'The novel is an act of recovery, an attempt to come to terms with a set of massive events that remained curiously inarticulate'⁵⁹ is thus comparable to Pynchon's attempt, in his two most recent novels *Vineland* and *Mason and Dixon*, to travel back to the moment where it all began to go wrong for America.

If DeLillo's novel ultimately fails to deliver a message of hope for the future – the underworld of waste at the heart of his novel, as I commented earlier in the chapter, does not represent the same potential for transcendence as it does in Pynchon – I believe it is because he is unable to escape from the shadow cast over American history by the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy. I have already drawn attention to DeLillo's repeated emphasis on the psychological effects the assassination had on him. He goes so far as to admit that: 'It's possible I wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am if it weren't for the assassination'⁶⁰. Certainly the assassination regularly finds its way into his writing. As well as the dedicated *Libra* and investigative articles like "American

⁵⁸ DeLillo Interview with O'Toole. 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Quoted in DeCurtis. "An Outsider in this Society". From Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 49. Lentricchia is adamant that DeLillo's novels could not have been written before the mid-1960's so dense are they with a particular kind of historical outrage. Frank Lentricchia. "The American Writer as Bad Citizen: Introducing Don DeLillo". *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 89, no. 2 (Spring 1990), 244.

Blood”, his first novel *Americana* ends in Dealy Plaza (377); one of the terrorists in *Players* claim to have known Oswald ‘before Dallas’ (161); while in *White Noise*, Heinrich’s friend is serving time for a murder inspired by: ‘Voices....Telling him to go down in history’ (44). Even *Underworld*, the novel that allegedly focuses on Thomson, the ‘anti-Oswald’, whom DeLillo describes as: ‘The boyish joyous counterpart who captured a moment of innocence before America’s slide into paranoia and confusion through the Cold War’⁶¹, is overshadowed by the climactic events in Dallas. The traditional question asked by all who remember the assassination is adapted to relate to the baseball match: ‘People still said to each other, more than forty years later, Where were you when Thomson hit the homer?’ (94); while the famous Zapruder movie emerges at an artists’ soiree (488). The contrast underlined between people’s reactions to the assassination: ‘We watched TV in dark rooms....We were all separate and alone’; and to the home run: ‘People rushed outside. People wanted to be together’ (94) suggests that DeLillo’s real subject is the irreversible changes forged in the American psyche by the assassination. His own inability to come to terms with and rise above his historic legacy is abundantly apparent from its dominant presence in his literary imagination.

Throughout this chapter, I have outlined the effects of the forces of consumerism and the mass media on the world depicted by DeLillo, and examined the strategies adopted by his characters in order to survive in this world. Different though the two most popular strategies are – some characters try to purify themselves by retreating from contemporary structures, while others throw themselves wholeheartedly into the pursuit of these ordering narratives – the end result is the same: the individual psyche becomes subsumed to such a degree by external forces that it disintegrates. It is evident that DeLillo’s universe is subject to the same guiding principle as Pynchon’s, namely Newton’s Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that all progress leads to disorder. Newton’s words are echoed by Win Everett who asserts that: ‘Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death’ (*Libra*, 221). Certainly the high incidence of violent death in DeLillo’s novels testifies to the truth of

⁶¹ DeLillo Interview with O’Toole, 5.

this observation. *End Zone* not only frequently refers to the language of nuclear war, but carries an unusually high number of fatalities among its characters: 'A team-mate is killed in an auto accident, the college president dies in a plane crash, one coach commits suicide, another succumbs suddenly to a debilitating illness, the star running back withdraws into mysticism, and the narrator himself, in the novel's last paragraph, spirals into brain fever'⁶²; *Great Jones Street* posits its hero at the crossroads between murder and suicide; *Ratner's Star* anticipates the impending apocalypse; *Running Dog* and *Players* feature groups of terrorists; *Libra* recounts the violent deaths not only of the famous trio, Kennedy, Oswald and Ruby, but of anyone even remotely connected with the plot to assassinate the President: 'Nicholas Branch has a roster of the dead. A printout of the names of witnesses, informers, investigators, people linked to Lee H. Oswald, people linked to Jack Ruby, all conveniently and suggestively dead' (57); *Mao II* describes both the professional and actual death of Bill Gray, but also draws our attention to the growing usurpation of art by terrorism, as illustrated by the 'fatwa' imposed upon Salman Rushdie which was one of the inspirations behind the novel⁶³; while *Underworld* is narrated under the shadow of the Bomb. Of course the novel most wholly devoted to death is *White Noise*, a novel whose treatment of a new form of death associated with postmodernism merits further attention.

It is very appropriate that the working title for *White Noise* was *The American Book of the Dead*⁶⁴ for it is populated with characters so enveloped in the idea of their impending deaths that they are hardly able to enjoy life. What is significant about death as it is represented in the novel is precisely that it is a representation, for ironically the death-toll in the novel itself is remarkably low. What we do learn about death is that it has become almost completely mediated in the postmodern world. The only actual incidence of death in the novel, for example, is that of an old woman who dies of a 'lingering dread' which was the result of her having been lost in a shopping mall for over four days (99). This makes the connection between the white noise generated by the

⁶² Johnston, 265.

⁶³ Nora Kerr, "I Take the Language Apart", *The New York Times Book Review* (Sunday, 9 June, 1991), 7.

⁶⁴ Michael Valdez Moses, "Lust Removed From Nature", From Lentricchia, ed., *New Essays on "White Noise"*, 79.

sounds and images of the supermarket and the white noise of death explicit. It also undermines the belief expressed by the Gladney's that consumerism represents a source of salvation for them.

Above all else, *White Noise* explores the idea that technology has radically changed the nature of contemporary death. This change has occurred, according to Moses, in two ways. Firstly, by representing an individual's death as symbols on computer print-outs, it is transformed into yet another commodity intended for mass consumption. Jack, for example, describes the alienation he experiences when his vital statistics are presented to him in such a way: 'It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself' (142). The second, and related, way in which death, according to Moses, has been transformed is through our increasing identification with the camera eye which fosters the illusion that the individual viewer, like the media themselves, is: 'A permanent fixture possessing transcendent perspective'⁶⁵. I have explored this phenomenon in relation to Weed Atman, in Pynchon's *Vineland*, who finds himself eternally trapped between the two mediated states of life and death; to Bill Gray who experiences a kind of pseudo-death when his photograph is taken: 'Sitting for a picture is morbid business. A portrait doesn't begin to mean anything until the subject is dead' (*Mao II*, 42); and to Oswald whose death will never be final as long as it continues to be replayed by the media. The distress felt by Beryl Parmenter as she watches Oswald's death endlessly repeated on her television: 'She'd been crying all weekend, crying and watching' (446) is an indication, Thomas explains, that she recognizes the truth of the argument that death is what gives life meaning (117) – a meaning now forever lost due to the ease at which the media can repeat what was once a final and absolute state. Thomas' observation can also be applied to *White Noise*, where Murray similarly claims that our acknowledgement of the boundary that is death is what gives our lives a sense of meaning and purpose: 'Doesn't our knowledge of death make life more precious?' (284). Unfortunately, his advice that Jack should become a master rather than a victim

⁶⁵ Ibid. 73.

of death by embracing violence under the proviso that: 'Violence is a form of rebirth. The dier passively succumbs. The killer lives on' (290), does not benefit him to any great degree for as he finds out when he confronts Willie Mink, violence only adds to the entropy and confusion already rife in contemporary society. The characters in *White Noise* are thus trapped within a society in which death is ever-present in the background noise of consumerism and the mass media, but has become mediated to such a degree that it can never be confronted and thus defeated. In this context, Wilcox's claim that Jack's confrontation with Mink represents a metaphorical clash of modern and postmodern cultures is an interesting one, because it implies that what Jack fears most about his exposure to Mink's dislocated and fractured psyche is that he will put the integrity of his own identity at risk.

This conclusion that society is moving ever further towards disorder was also discussed in relation to the novels of Thomas Pynchon. The latter, however, leaves us with some hope that this progression can be halted and even reversed. His main instrument of salvation is the family, whose sense of loyalty and community may be enough to withstand the pressure from destructive external forces. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, although DeLillo does cover some of the same ground as Pynchon, his conclusions about the future of society are generally not as optimistic. I have also drawn attention to the fact that some of DeLillo's pessimism stems from the dominant position held by the assassination of President Kennedy in his imagination. One of the results of the assassination was, of course, the fact that both the Kennedy and the Oswald children were left fatherless. This motif of a broken or incomplete family is one that resounds throughout DeLillo's fiction, underpinning much of the action. David Bell's movie in *Americana*, for example, like so many of the quests undertaken by Pynchon's characters, is motivated by his desire to recapture the essence of his deceased mother. The passion that underlies the scenes featuring his mother: 'I cut again and asked her to get closer to him and to put her hands on his shoulders' (317), as well as

the resentment he carries against his father, however, obviously point to an oedipal complex⁶⁶. This ultimately undermines the idea that his family can constitute any source of support for him.

As I pointed out above, Oswald's actions robbed his own children of a father. What is interesting is that Oswald too grew up without a paternal influence, a situation to which his mother ascribes much of his future unhappiness: 'The other kids ragged him all the time and he had problems keeping up, a turbulence running through him, the accepted fact of a fatherless boy' (*Libra*, 4)⁶⁷. Nick Shay finds himself in a similar situation when his father, Jimmy Constanza, leaves one day to buy a packet of cigarettes and never returns. His absence is felt acutely by Nick throughout his life and is compounded by the fact that he does not even bear his father's name: 'He left her for a time before I was born. This is why I carry her name, not his.... This is why my birth certificate says Shay' (105). His description of his father's disappearance: 'The earth opened up and he stepped inside.... I think he went under' (808) is significant because it suggests that the various 'underworlds' in which Nick immerses himself represent an attempt to replace his absent father with some protective structure like his work. Unfortunately, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, this kind of immersion in an external structure does not generally yield any benefits for DeLillo's characters. Finally, the hostility with which the Gladney children treat any visit from a member of their wider families: 'They were suspicious of all relatives. Relatives were a sensitive issue, part of the murky and complex past' (249) implies that the tradition of the extended family, with all its implications of support and security, is a thing of the past in contemporary America. The sense of hope and transcendence surrounding the Becker-Traverse annual reunion in *Vineland* is, therefore, not a possibility in DeLillo.

Sexual relationships in DeLillo's fiction tend to be similarly unfulfilling, mainly due to the fact that sex has become so mediated by the mass media that it has been emptied of any significance. David Bell, who married his wife because they made such

⁶⁶ See Keesey, *Don DeLillo*, 27.

⁶⁷ It is significant that Oswald's relationship with his mother was also problematic. One of his brothers, John Pic, has suggested that the main reason Oswald joined the Marines was to escape from: 'The yoke of oppression from my mother'. Quoted in Mailer, *Oswald's Tale*, 378.

a photogenic couple (*Americana*, 30), admits that he can make love to her only if he seduces her cinematically first: 'I had to seduce her first. These seductions often took their inspiration from the cinema' (35). The Wynants, in *Players*, regard sex as an obligation, as evidenced by the mechanical terms in which they think of it: 'It is time to "perform", he thought. She would have to be "satisfied". He would have to "service" her' (35). This subordination of the act itself to the words associated with it reaches its culmination in *The Day Room*, where sex is effectively replaced by language: 'Do this for me. Say, "My skin is alabaster". Describe your body for me. Believable language. That's what we want' (10). Even *White Noise*, the novel ostensibly centred on a happy family, contributes to the dismantling of sex as a meaningful act. Jack and Babette become so consumed in their bid to find some literature to use as foreplay that they lose interest in sex and look through some photograph albums instead (30); while Babette refuses to listen to any recriminations when it is revealed that she prostituted herself for a regular supply of Dylar: 'This is not a story about your disappointment at my silence. The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it' (192). Although usually regarded as a meaningful and life-affirming act, therefore, sex in DeLillo has become emptied of significance to such a degree that it no longer has the power to bring people closer together.

In spite of the general undermining of the family as an institution, DeLillo's characters appear to retain a faith that their salvation rests in their children. The reason for this, as DeLillo explains, is that: 'We feel, perhaps superstitiously, that kids have a direct route to, have direct contact to the kind of natural truth that eludes us as adults'⁶⁸. The reason children inspire adults with so much hope, according to Murray Siskind, is that they do not suffer from the most debilitating condition of all – fear of death: 'You sense his total ego, his freedom from limits....He doesn't know he's going to die' (*White Noise*, 289). Wilder, the child in question, later illustrates his invulnerability by crossing a busy freeway on his tricycle: 'They veered, braked, sounded their horns down the long afternoon, an animal lament. The child would not even look at them,

⁶⁸ Quoted in DeCurtis, "An Outsider in this Society". From Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 64.

pedalled straight for the median strip, a narrow patch of pale grass' (323). His ability to navigate his way safely through the streams of traffic could also be related to the metaphorical significance of the two generations of the Gladney family: the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. Wilder's casual confidence that he can survive in the chaos of the contemporary world is the main reason his parents regard him as a source of security and protection for themselves.

DeLillo's commitment to the possibility, however laid to waste by contemporary forces, of domesticity as the life-support we cannot do without is the reason, Lentricchia suggests, for the huge commercial success of *White Noise*⁶⁹. If Lentricchia is correct, it is safe to assume that DeLillo's readers are themselves clinging to the hope that family can constitute a protective shield against the outside world. In spite of this apparent privileging of the family as the source of hope for the future, however, I do not believe that DeLillo is really so optimistic about its ability to save its own members and the wider community from the entropic forces besieging them. The problem is that his fictional families generally have an absence or void at their centre. For all their apparent solidarity, for example, not one of the Gladney children is living with both biological parents. Moreover, like every other structure to which Jack and Babette cling for support, their children also contribute in various ways to the surrounding chaos: Heinrich, who at the age of fourteen has a receding hairline (22), works ceaselessly to collapse the boundaries between reality and representation - boundaries his father is so desperate to retain: ' "It's going to rain tonight". "It's raining now". "The radio said tonight"' (22); Denise and Steffie throw themselves wholeheartedly into the Airborne Toxic Event, obediently displaying the prescribed symptoms: 'She could have heard it on the kitchen radio, where she and Denise had probably learned about sweaty palms and vomiting before developing these symptoms themselves' (125). By volunteering to be 'victims' during one of the simulations that are rapidly taking over in importance from the real disasters, they also contribute to the widespread reversal of the traditional relationship between cause and effect: 'If she does it (death) now, she might not have to

⁶⁹ Introduction to Lentricchia, ed., *New Essays on "White Noise"*, 7.

do it later. The more you practice something, the less likely it is to actually happen' (207); and even Wilder, who is idolized by his parents for his innocence and freedom from fear, is shown to be a relatively unhappy child given to frequent and unexplained bouts of crying: 'This was the day Wilder started crying at two in the afternoon. At six he was still crying' (75). Although Jack and Babette are too preoccupied to notice, therefore, the structure on which they base much of their lives together - their children - is itself obviously vulnerable to the 'white noise' from which they are trying to escape. Again this appears to support the argument that the Gladney children represent the fluidity and uncertainty of the postmodern world from which their parents are so desperate to hide.

A particularly poignant remark made by Oswald concerns the birth of his first child, June: 'When Marina told him she was pregnant he thought his life made sense at last. A father took part. He had a place, an obligation' (206). The failure of his new role as a father to provide him with the sense of belonging and stability he so desperately craved testifies to the diminishing strength of the family in a world increasingly swamped with the signs and images of consumerism and the mass media. This is perhaps one of the things that motivated DeLillo to return, in *Underworld*, to the more family-oriented 1950's when, unimpeded by the manipulative force of television, fathers and sons bonded over such simple traditions as baseball games: 'A man takes his kid to a game and thirty years later this is what they talk about when the poor old mutt's wasting away in the hospital' (31). The absence of Nick's father at the time of the historic Giants-Dodgers clash obviously contributes to the sense of lack he continues to feel throughout his life. What is significant, however, is the degree to which the family as an institution is denigrated in *Underworld*. We are told that Nick's situation is very much the norm in the Bronx where the monks who distribute food among the needy are the chief representatives of the male gender: 'They were men in a place where few men remained' (240). The general consensus, in fact, is that children are probably better off without the interference of their parents: 'The truth of the matter there's kids that are better off without their mothers or fathers. Because their mothers or fathers are endangering their safety' (244). The problem, perhaps, is that the older generation,

frightened by the chaos and turbulence of the contemporary world, are impeding the progress of their children. Although DeLillo may thus have been hoping to recover the idea of family as constituting the centre of social life, the evidence uncovered in the novel suggests that Russ Hodges is correct when he chides himself for thinking of the family groupings among the spectators at the baseball game in such sentimental terms: 'He knows we don't look like that anymore. The postwar boom has changed the way we look'⁷⁰ (34). The fact that Hodges' musing does not appear in the later version of the story of the baseball game in *Underworld* suggests that the possibility that such family groupings exist grows ever more remote as time goes by. In spite of DeLillo's wishes, therefore, *Underworld* represents an acknowledgement that the traditional ideal of the integrated family is no longer viable in a society besieged by the alienating forces of consumerism and the mass media.

⁷⁰ Don DeLillo, "Pafko at the Wall", *Harper's* (October 1992), 34.

Chapter 3: Bret Easton Ellis.

‘Nobody’s Home’ – *Less Than Zero*.

Given that, as Bret Easton Ellis himself admits, few of his generation were alive, much less remember, the assassination of President Kennedy¹, it might appear that he could not possibly have too much in common with DeLillo whose work is so influenced by the chaos that followed Kennedy’s death. I believe, however, that the themes discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the fiction of DeLillo form an appropriate framework within which to examine Ellis, not least because much of what the former has prophesized for the future of American society – the increase of violence and the fracturing of the family, in particular – appears to have come to fruition in the novels of the latter. It is significant that Heinrich Gladney, who was a precocious fourteen-year-old when *White Noise* was published in 1984, is of roughly the same age as the college students in *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) and as Victor Ward, the twenty-something model in *Glamorama* (1998), for the superficial world in which Ellis’ characters live could be regarded as an inevitable development on a world in which a young boy refuses to believe what he sees unless it is confirmed by the media². In the terms of one of the arguments made in relation to DeLillo, Ellis’ characters inhabit the postmodern world which was such a source of anxiety and terror for Jack Gladney. The central role played by the forces of consumerism and the mass media in Ellis’ novels will be discussed in the course of this chapter. I will begin, however, with a brief overview of the characteristics of the world in which these texts are located.

On the surface, recent American history does not seem relevant to Ellis’ novels to the same extent as it was to Pynchon and DeLillo. History, after all, has been destabilized as a grand narrative in much of postmodern literature. Ellis himself comments that due to the multitude of images shown on television his generation do not share the same memories and are thus less cohesive as an age-group than previous generations would have been: ‘Given the conflicting images of

¹ ‘The Twentysomethings’. H1.

² I am referring here to Heinrich’s conversation with his father about rain (22).

our upbringing, it's not surprising that this generation has defied categorization....We have fractured into splinter groups connected only by birthdates'³. Unlike DeLillo's characters who are all bonded by their memories of the Kennedy assassination, therefore, Ellis' are less unified and less historically conscious. This is not to say, however, that his novels are any less informed by or relevant to the historical period in which they are set. On the contrary, as Annesley points out, Ellis' fiction is very much a product of the contemporary period: 'Loaded with references to the products, personalities and places that characterize late twentieth-century American life....profoundly aware of its own time and place'⁴. Far from undermining the concept of history, therefore, the foregrounding of the brand-names and advertizing slogans that characterizes Ellis' fiction makes it very much a product of the surrounding consumer culture. One of the most dramatic consequences of this saturation of society with the signs and images of consumerism and the mass media, as was discussed in the introductory chapter, has been the replacement of the real with its representation and the subsumation of the commodity into its image – a condition Baudrillard calls the 'hyperreal'. Ellis' fictional world corresponds in many ways to the ideal of the postmodern as espoused by Baudrillard⁵, and is particularly influenced by two aspects of the theory: firstly, the idea that the surface or image should be privileged at all times; and, secondly, that many traditional distinctions – between reality and representation, art and life, for example – have been collapsed. These characteristics will be discussed in relation to Ellis' fiction in the first section of the chapter.

Many observers lament the state of contemporary society in which the object is subordinated to its image, the real to its representation and essence to its appearance. One critic complains, for example, that it is now almost impossible to find: 'An intellectual who will use the word 'reality' without quotation marks'⁶, for it is widely accepted that the ideal of authentic expression and of reality is itself but

³ Quoted in Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place*, 184.

⁴ James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 6.

⁵ Baudrillard's dominance with regard to the aspects of postmodern theory with which Ellis primarily engages is acknowledged by Jameson in *Postmodernism*. See pp. 234, 395.

⁶ T. J. Jackson Lears, "Sherwood Anderson: Looking for the White Spot". From Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 13.

a cultural construct, mediated by representation and interpretation. Ellis' characters reveal themselves to be very much at home in a world characterized by superficiality for they focus above all else on their appearances. They introduce each other primarily in terms of what they are wearing: 'Spin's wearing a T-shirt that reads "Gumby. Pokey. The Blockheads" and black 501's' (*Less Than Zero*, 184); 'Girls dressed in pinks and blues, Esprit and Benetton sweatshirts...looking like they stepped out of a Starburst commercial' (*The Rules of Attraction*, 122); 'Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti' (*American Psycho*, 5). Even their facial expressions are revealed to be superficial, deliberately assumed when appropriate. The forced smiles on their faces: ' "Turn that frown upside down"....I try to smile....mimicking a normal person' correspond far less to any genuine emotions than to 'emoticons', which are pictorial representations of emotions made from keyboard characters, and thus not necessarily linked to any particular depth of feeling⁸. Nor do Ellis' characters demonstrate any desire to delve beneath this surface. During a discussion about women, for example, the characters in *American Psycho* conclude not only that appearance is of primary importance: 'It's all *looks*' (90), but furthermore that anything deeper is both unnecessary and unwelcome: 'If they have a good personality then....something is very wrong' (91). Instead of revealing any nostalgia for a time in which there was more to life than appearance, therefore, Ellis' characters are obviously quite content with their superficial lives.

One of the reasons the image or representation is accorded such a privileged role in our society, according to Baudrillard, is that recent innovations in the electronic media have meant that information has started to circulate at the speed of light, thus collapsing the difference between the real and its representation, a state that has reached its ideal form in the Polaroid photograph in which the object and its image coexist almost simultaneously (*America*, 37). Any distinctions that may once have existed between reality and representation have thus been blurred to the point

⁷ Bret Easton Ellis, *The Informers* (GB: Picador, 1995), 86.

⁸ Katie Argyle and Rob Shields, "Is There A Body in the Net?" From Rob Shields, ed., *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1996), 65. Examples of these 'emoticons' are :) for 'happy' and :(for 'sad'.

of extinction. America itself is hailed by Baudrillard as the ultimate example of this hyperreality, for he claims that its entire way of life displays all the characteristics of fiction (*America*, 95). It is thus in the streets rather than in the movie theatres that we will find the cinematic. Many of Ellis' characters accordingly live lives that bear a strong resemblance to movies: Paul Denton, one of the narrators of *The Rules of Attraction*, for example, considers taking part in a student play before dismissing it as unnecessary: 'Thought why bother, when I'm already stuck in one: my life' (39). Victor Ward, narrator of *Glamorama*, is literally living his life as a movie, his every action scripted and recorded by a variety of directors and film crews: 'I was told to look sad...as if my world were falling apart' (193); 'It's the cue for a kiss' (255); 'Wakened suddenly out of a brief dreamless nap by someone calling "Action"' (282). The multi-layered composition of Victor's life makes it impossible either for himself or for the reader to gauge whether he is ever being true to himself or merely perpetually acting.

This collapse of boundaries and celebration of surfaces is, of course, one of the central features associated with postmodern art, and specifically with what Annesley describes as 'blank fictions': novels that are loaded with references to the products, personalities and places that characterize late twentieth-century American life (6). Indeed Ellis' novels are often criticized for their overwhelming and obsessively detailed lists of brandnames and celebrities. In *American Psycho*, for example, Patrick Bateman gives us a full two-page run-down of his daily beauty routine: 'In the shower I use first a water-activated gel cleanser, then a honey-almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub....' (26); while in *Glamorama*, Victor leads us through a seemingly endless A to Z of the rich and famous of New York society: 'Naomi Campbell, Helena Christensen, Cindy Crawford, Sheryl Crow, David Charvet, Courtney Cox....' (8). To criticize these novels for their wealth of contemporary cultural references, however, is to miss the point. Lehman's dismissal of Ellis' novels as possessing: 'All the intellectual nourishment of a well-made beer commercial'⁹ may be accurate, but it fails to take into account that these novels only mirror their setting in a world dominated by infomercials and advertizements, and are thus engaging with: 'The kind of weighty

⁹ David Lehman, "Two Divine Decadents". *Newsweek* (7 September, 1987), 72.

material forces that are fundamental to the whole functioning of late twentieth-century society'¹⁰. This is an important point to take into consideration when attempting to evaluate Ellis' novels critically. The fact that the depthless of the world in which he sets his texts is reflected in the superficiality of the narratives themselves forces the reader to forego the search for critical depth as it simply does not exist. That this is a deliberate ploy rather than a weakness is emphasized by Ellis himself who, when discussing Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero*, remarks: 'That would always bother me when people would say, "the hero of the novel". He isn't a hero at all to me. He's like this big void'¹¹. This lack of psychological depth is further reflected in the dearth of critical material engaging with Ellis' texts. The fact that most of the secondary material cited throughout this chapter appears in newspapers or on the Internet (with the exception of books by Annesley, Young and Caveney, and a handful of journal articles) is indicative of a lack of critical interest in Ellis and a refusal, perhaps, to take him seriously. This is surprising given that he is both a long-standing (*Less Than Zero* was first published in 1985) and a well-known author (the controversy surrounding the publication of *American Psycho* generated quite an amount of interest). The derisive manner in which he dismissed by critics like Lehman is all the more surprising given that his fiction closely adheres to the: 'New kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense' cited by Jameson (*Postmodernism*, 9) as one of the defining characteristics of postmodern literature.

It is appropriate that the phenomena described above came back to haunt Ellis in a very extreme way in the controversy that surrounded the publication of *American Psycho* – public reaction that certainly underlines Ellis' claim that American society is predominantly superficial and that life and art are no longer distinguishable. The problem, as Heath points out, was that many of his critics failed to differentiate Ellis himself from his characters: 'His critics see his characters' lack of imagination as reflecting his own lack of imagination; their obsession with trivial pop culture and numbing intoxicants as reflecting his own shallowness; their moral

¹⁰ Annesley, 10.

¹¹ Ellis interview with Mark Amerika and Alexander Laurence.
<http://www.altx.com/interviews/bret.easton.ellis.html>

purposelessness as reflecting his own'¹². The connections drawn between his fiction and real life also resemble Baudrillard's Polaroid symbol, where the object and its image are virtually indistinguishable. Ellis himself regularly clashed with his disclaimers about the relation of his novel to society: 'Ellis feels we're living in a murderous, contaminated world; His enemies see him as a murderously contaminating presence. He sees his fiction as a symptom of decay; They see his fiction as one of its causes'¹³. In spite of his attempts to distance himself from his fictional psychopath: 'I would think most Americans learn in junior high to distinguish between the writer and the character he is writing about. People seem to insist I'm a monster. But Bateman is the monster. I am *not* on the side of that creep'¹⁴, he has been the subject of graphic and brutal death threats and was forced to cancel his promotional tour as a precaution, a highly unusual occurrence for a best-selling novelist.

One of the problems appears to be an insistence on the part of his critics that the novel's protagonist, Patrick Bateman, is a moral being with the ability to differentiate right from wrong. In fact he is no such thing. On the contrary, Bateman is a character utterly lacking in psychological depth and able to describe his barbarous deeds in such an unemotional manner simply because they mean nothing to him: 'Earlier in the day I had sawed off her left arm, which is finally what killed her, and right now I pick it up, holding it by the bone....' (252). This detachment is further reflected in the narrative voice which neither condones nor condemns what it describes. What is significant about *American Psycho* is that its narrative is full of contradictions. In spite of a detailed and graphic description of Bateman's murder of Paul Owen, for example: 'Blood sprays out in twin brownish geysers, staining my raincoat. This is accompanied by a horrible momentary hissing noise actually coming from the wounds in Paul's skull' (217); the alleged victim is said to be alive and well at the end of the novel: 'I had....dinner....with Paul Owen....twice....in London....*just ten days ago*' (388). There are a number of possible explanations for

¹² Chris Heath. "Bret Easton Ellis". *Rolling Stone* (24 December. 1998).

<http://www.ennui.clara.net/ellis/stone1.html>

¹³ Nicci Gerard. "Bret and the Beast in the Corner". *The Observer* (16 October. 1994). Life. 14.

¹⁴ Quoted in Roger Cohen. "Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of *American Psycho*". *New York Times* (6 March. 1991). C18.

this. Owen's murder, and by extension all the other violent incidents described in the course of the novel, could be no more than a figment of Bateman's unusually morbid imagination. On the other hand, Owen's alleged reappearance could be nothing more remarkable than a case of mistaken identity. After all, Bateman too is frequently misrecognized by those claiming to be close friends and acquaintances – another symptom of the superficial level of personal interactions in Ellis' fiction. Finally, and in the context of this chapter as a whole most importantly, it could be regarded as further proof of the depthless nature of Ellis' fictional world: a world so lacking in substance that the traditional relationship of cause and effect has been disestablished to such a degree that what one characters does, or claims to do, has little or no effect on any other. Having thus established that the world in which Ellis sets his novels – and, in some respects, the world into which they were received – is one comprized of surfaces and one in which reality and representation are no longer distinguishable, the next section of this chapter will discuss the presence of the forces of consumerism and the mass media in Ellis' novels, emphasizing primarily the ways in which they impact on the lives of his characters.

Given the widespread preoccupation with surfaces in the postmodern world, it is no wonder that the outward appearance or packaging of a good often takes precedence over its essence. This tendency was discussed in the previous chapter on DeLillo, and illustrated in the long conversation Jack Gladney and Murray Siskind have about the subject in *White Noise*: 'Most of all I like the packages themselves. You were right, Jack. This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock' (19). This privileging of surface results, according to Boorstin, in a further blurring of distinctions between the object and its representation, making it sometimes difficult to know: 'Where the desired physical object ended and where its environment began' (*The Americans*, 435). This phenomenon reaches its apex in the appropriation of the face by cosmetics manufacturers and its subsequent objectification as a commodity¹⁵. This objectification of the face is part of what Baudrillard calls 'the omnipresent cult of the body', which signifies a concentration on outward appearance not as a source of pleasure but rather in the obsessive fear of

¹⁵ This objectification reaches its apex in Brian D'Amato's novel *Beauty*, in which the narrator, a plastic surgeon, systematically remodels his patients' faces with a kind of plastic that will cause the reconstructed areas to remain cold and numb (London: Gratton, 1992), 29.

failure or substandard performance (*America*, 35). This fanaticism is poignantly illustrated in *The Informers*, in which one of the characters, an anorexic girl very close to death, focuses exclusively on getting the darkest tan possible before she dies: 'It's all she wants to do. Lie on the beach, in the sun' (213). Nor incidentally is her proximity to death regarded as an excuse for her haggard appearance, as a conversation between two of her friends illustrates: ' "She's looking pretty shitty, dude".... "But she's dying".... "Yeah, but she still looks pretty shitty"' (214). The society in which Ellis' characters live is, therefore, one in which surface is privileged above all else, and one's preoccupation with appearance is expected to continue until death and even beyond.

The meaning of life, according to *Glamorama*, is inscribed in three words: 'Prada, Prada, Prada' (49) – an appropriate mantra for a novel about models who live their lives according to the maxim that beauty: 'Is a sign of intelligence' (40) and the only commodity worth having. For Chloe, one of the models, a flaw, no matter how small or temporary, is a matter of extreme panic: 'She gets a blackhead and wants to kill herself' (24), while Victor, her boy-friend and fellow model, is constantly mulling over his own reflection: 'Checking out my profile calms me down' (143). This last example supports Baudrillard's theory that the worship of beauty is far less a narcissistic pleasure than a way of checking that one's position within the world has not changed. The high standards expected by another of the characters in *Glamorama* of the women he dates: 'He would weigh girls....you had to be a certain weight....a certain height....in order to fuck Bobby Hughes' (310-1) further underlines these extremes. In this context, it is understandable that the final straw for Victor's relationship with Chloe is not her realization that he has been unfaithful to her, but when he knowingly allows her to wear the same designer outfit as his mistress to the opening of his club (150). Given this level of concentration on appearance, it is appropriate that Ellis also emphasizes the visual aspect of his work almost as much as its content: 'If I see that a paragraph looks – just aesthetically, visually – too long and for some reason interrupts some narrative flow or fluidity, then I will break that paragraph up'¹⁶. The structure of his texts thus reflect their

¹⁶ Quoted in George Higa. "Representations of Good and Evil in a Modern and Postmodern World". <http://www.ennui.clara.net/ellis/gooddevil.html>

content to a large degree. *The Rules of Attraction* is an unframed narrative, beginning and ending randomly in the middle of sentences: ‘and it’s a story that might bore you....’ (13); ‘....my hand squeezing her knee, and she’ (283), reflecting the fact that: ‘Life has no narrative – why should books?’¹⁷. The author of these novels in which image and appearance reign supreme is thus obviously just as susceptible to the dictates of appearance as his characters.

What is imperative to remember, as I have pointed out throughout this thesis, is that when the characters choose to buy certain brand names they are also associating themselves with the mythology connected to these goods by advertizing. The slogans of various advertizements resonate throughout Ellis’ novels and form the basis for many of the conversations between different characters. Patrick Bateman’s detailed run-down of his preferred beauty products is a particularly good example of the extent to which the messages and clichés of advertizements have been internalized: ‘The conditioner is also good – silicone technology permits conditioning benefits without weighing down the hair which can also make you look older’ (*American Psycho*, 26). This appropriation of scientific jargon to sell shampoo is but one indication that advertizing has permeated many different aspects of life. Annesley points to the clichés that dominate Clay’s language in *Less Than Zero* as proof that he too is: ‘Both deeply influenced by external impressions and wholly caught up in communicative codes that have more to do with the repetitive slogans and commercial choruses of advertizing than the demands of personal expression’(95-6). The ‘adolescent malleability’ denoted by his name¹⁸ makes him appropriately susceptible to the power of the image, as illustrated in the terror a billboard carrying the message ‘Disappear Here’ (38) inspires in him.

In spite of this overwhelming sense of imprisonment within the clichés of advertizing, however, Annesley insists that Ellis’ characters nonetheless find a way in which to express themselves by using elements from the commercial world for their own purposes (96-7). According to this theory, when Victor, the narrator of *Glamorama*, expresses himself through lyrics: ‘I’m a loser, baby....So why don’t you kill me?’ (79) – a line from a Beck song incidentally also used by Annesley as

¹⁷ Quoted in Gerard. 14.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney. *Shopping in Space: Essays on American “Blank Generation” Fiction* (New York and London: Serpent’s Tail. 1992). 23.

an introduction to his own book – his emotions are no less real for their mediated expression. Given that we are never quite certain if Victor's life is ever conducted without the guidance of various directors and film crews, Annesley's claim that he somehow manages to retain an authentic centre – regardless of the fact that authenticity is generally regarded as a mere social construct in postmodern culture – does seem overly optimistic, especially when put in the context of *American Psycho*, a novel framed by assurances that we are firmly trapped within the confines of contemporary consumer society: 'ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE' (3)... 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT' (399). Annesley's optimism seems all the more unlikely when we consider that advertizing is only one of the powerful forces exerting its influence on the world of Ellis' novels.

Alongside the forces of consumerism and advertizing, the mass media are also a dominant presence in Ellis' novels. Once more, the power of the media – especially of television – stems from their ability to enter into the minds of their audience, thus confirming the predictions made by McLuhan in 1951: 'The ad agencies and Hollywood...are always trying to get inside the public mind in order to impose their collective dreams on that inner stage' (*The Mechanical Bride*, 97). Even when not actually watching television, the spectator is nonetheless still affected by the images he/she has already internalized. This manifests itself, as Kinder points out, both in public, in the consumer's deliberate choice of product, and in private, when images are reprocessed in thoughts or dreams¹⁹, a tendency exhibited, for example, in Clay's constant mulling over the words he reads on an advertizing billboard (*Less Than Zero*, 38). Ellis himself is quite open about the effect television has had both on his own life and his work, admitting that: 'TV has unconsciously, whether we want to admit it or not, shaped all of our visions to an inordinate degree', and citing his cultural reference points as consisting of: 'Books, movies, TV and rock 'n' roll'²⁰. It is thus no surprise that the lives of his characters are shaped by the mass media to the same extent as they are by the forces of consumerism and advertizing.

¹⁹ Marsha Kinder. "Music Video and the Spectator". *Film Quarterly*, vol.38, no.1 (1985), 11.

²⁰ Quoted in Amerika and Laurence. <http://www.altx.com/interviews/bret.easton.ellis.html>

Television influences Ellis' characters in a variety of ways. Some look to it to fill the void left by the dismantling of religion. Clay, in *Less Than Zero*, listens to a television missionary who proclaims that Jesus will come 'through the eye of that television screen' in order to free the spectator of his frustration and hopelessness. Needless to say, although Clay waits by his television for close to an hour, nothing happens (140). Similarly, when Danny, one of the characters in *The Informers*, receives the news of the murder of a friend, he lies watching 'some religious show on cable' (82), a testament to the extent to which even prayer has become mediated. Patrick Bateman's obsession with a talk show called *The Patty Winters Show*, in *American Psycho*, also corresponds to a quasi-religious devotion. His narrative is punctuated with detailed accounts of the daily show, which explores every conceivable topic from Autism (63); to Perfumes, Lipsticks, Makeups (93); to Descendants of Members of the Donner Party (107); to Dwarf Tossing (167); to Salad Bars (225); to Home Abortion Kits (330), and so on. As well as providing us with a window into the preoccupations of network television, *The Patty Winters Show*, according to Young and Caveney, serves as an important barometer to Bateman's sanity – his references to increasingly unlikely show topics like Interview with Bigfoot (381) and Interview with a Cheerio (386) provide us with the first clues that he is not to be trusted as a narrator (105). Alternatively, the correspondence of Bateman's madness to the show's increasingly bizarre topics could also suggest that the media, like consumerism, must bear some responsibility for the disintegration of his mind. This is a point that will be discussed later in the chapter.

One of the inescapable results of the permeation of contemporary society by the media is, according to Hughes, that television now defines people's sense of reality to such a degree that only it can validate their lives in an otherwise meaningless world (10). This condition is described by Baudrillard as the 'video phase', and defined as the need for our lives to resemble a 'perpetual video' in order to be worthwhile today (*America*, 37). This need to see themselves on camera is displayed by many of Ellis' characters. One of the narrators of *The Informers*, for example, is a newscaster who videos and watches herself broadcast every night, conscious of the fact that this is the only time her lover, Danny, really looks at her (88), the image obviously more fascinating to him than the woman lying beside him

in the flesh. Similarly, Victor, the narrator, successful model and It-boy in *Glamorama*, is compelled to buy magazines anytime he himself appears on the cover: 'I notice I'm still on the cover of the current issue of *Youth Quake*...and I've just got to buy another copy' (19). In fact Victor initially appears to represent the fulfilment of the desire held by all his co-characters to live their lives in the spotlight of a ceaselessly recording camera. As a successful model, he is in vogue with all the latest fashion trends, and as a popular It-boy dating a glamorous model, he has a ready access into all social settings that would be the envy of Patrick Bateman. At first, he appears to be only as susceptible to the power of the television as Ellis' other characters, echoing their use of mass-cultural references: ' "As *if*', I Alicia-Silverstone-in-*Clueless* back at him' (120). Shortly after his break-up with Chloe, however, we become aware that he appears to be following a movie script rather than expressing any personal emotions: 'She hangs up. The camera stops rolling and the makeup girl drops a couple of glycerine tears onto my face' (174). From that point on, his narrative is frequently punctuated with allusions to directors and camera crews: ' "Can we do that again?" the director asks. "Victor – put an emphasis on *I'm*. Okay, go ahead – we're still rolling"' (274). In particular, constant allusions are made both by Victor himself and by the various directors to the 'script' – an iron rule from which they absolutely cannot deviate: 'Just go about your business....Just follow the script' (205). This clearly structured narrative is precisely the reason such a life might appear so attractive to the characters in *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho*, who find themselves trapped within their apathetic, commodity-filled lives, unable even to articulate their predicament. Interestingly, this is a point also made by Sam, in Mason's *In Country*, as she compares Emmett's inability to express himself with some of her favourite television characters: 'On TV, people always had the words to express their feelings, while in real life hardly anyone ever did'. Her explanation for this: 'On TV, they had script writers' (45) suggests, however, that she is aware of the simulated and mediated nature of the latter and realizes that this ability to express oneself comes at a price.

In this context, it is no real surprise to discover that Victor's life is neither as ideal nor as fulfilling as the rest of Ellis' characters might think. In fact, rather than providing him with a well-structured and meaningful existence, his mediated life

quickly spirals out of control and he becomes trapped within two competing scripts, a situation that leaves him reeling with confusion: ‘ “We didn’t shoot a chase scene, Victor”....I felt something in me collapse’ (232). Victor’s inability to find his way out of the scripts into which he is written leads him to the inevitable conclusion that maybe there is no reality under the surface of the recording: ‘Everything’s bugged. Everything’s wired. Everything’s being filmed’ (348). His mounting sense of claustrophobia reaches its climax when the different scripts converge and he discovers that the directors, the terrorists he thought he had met by chance, and even his own father appear to have been involved in a conspiracy to remove him from America and trap him in Europe so that his immoral antics and wild lifestyle would not appear in the newspapers during his father’s campaign for political office: ‘He felt that some of your....antics, let’s say....they were distracting....unnecessary. There was the possibility of bad publicity’ (402). Amid such a collapse of the distinctions he had believed existed between his life and his art, Victor can only conclude that truth and authenticity are concepts which are no longer viable: ‘You’re telling me we can’t believe anything we’re shown anymore?....That *everything* is altered? That everything’s a lie?’ (406). The belief that television is the one force still possessing the power to validate their lives and make them bearable is clearly, if Victor’s experiences are any indication, one in which the rest of Ellis’ characters are mistaken.

Before leaving the subject of television and its impact on contemporary society, I believe a brief discussion of *The Truman Show*²¹, a movie written by Andrew Niccol and produced by Peter Weir, will provide further illumination of the points raised by Ellis in *Glamorama*. On first glance, the differences between the texts appear to be substantial, most notably with regard to the fact that Victor is aware of his existence in front of a recording camera while Truman, on the other hand, has lived for twenty-nine years oblivious that his entire life has been broadcast all over America and with no reason to suspect the ‘reality’ around him. Nor is there any doubt that Truman’s life really is being filmed, whereas there is a chance, as Cooper points out, that the movie in which Victor stars may be of his own imagining – a device to help him detach himself from any situation that threatens to become

²¹ Andrew Niccol, *The Truman Show* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1998).

too painful²². Nevertheless, the close similarities at the heart of the texts merit, in my opinion, a comparative study.

It is significant that both texts were published/released in 1998, for the feeling that life is being mediated by external forces is one that is becoming ever more prevalent in the contemporary world. In his Foreword to *The Truman Show*, Niccol claims that his script grew out of a conviction that the feeling that our lives were full of acting and even *overacting* was a common one (ix). Any strange behaviour we notice among our friends or family could be accounted for by acting or scriptural errors, while a sense of dissatisfaction with the course of our lives could be blamed on bad direction and budget cuts (x) – observations that could substantiate Cooper's claims that Victor is imagining the presence of a film crew in order to distance himself from any responsibility for the mess his life has become. The similarities continue within the scripts themselves, where the deliberate advertizing of sponsors' products by the actors who constitute Truman's family and friends: 'Meryl picks up a package and holds it to a camera.... "Why don't I make you some of this new Mococoa Drink? All natural. Cocoa beans from the upper slopes of Mount Nicaragua. No artificial sweeteners"' (64), corresponds to the detailed discussions of brand names and products by Ellis' characters. Both Victor and Truman even meet girls they fancy, Marina and Sylvia respectively, who try to alert them to surrounding dangers. Marina tries to warn Victor of the threat posed by a package (of explosives) he has been tricked into transporting to London: 'You're in fucking danger, Victor....Did anyone tell you to bring something – a package, an envelope, anything – to London?' (219); while Sylvia tries to explain the true, simulated nature of his environment to Truman: 'You think this is real? It's all for you. A show. The eyes are everywhere. They're watching you – *right now*' (35). Neither warning is heeded or even comprehended, and the girls are both removed from the scripts by the directors, although Marina, whose bathroom is subsequently discovered by Victor to contain traces of blood (225) appears to have come to a far more violent end than Sylvia, who is merely exiled from the set and forced to follow the rest of Truman's life as a viewer. Finally, as their previously ordered lives

²² Denis Cooper. "He Came From the 80's". *Spin* (December 1998).
<http://www.ennui.clara.net/ellis/spin1.html>

become increasingly chaotic and confused, both Victor and Truman discover they have been set up by family, friends and directors, and trapped into a script they were not aware existed. As Truman explains: 'Things that don't fit. Maybe I'm being set up for something. You ever feel like that?....Like your whole life has been building up to something?' (47). The fact that he first becomes aware that there is something peculiar about his life when part of a camera light falls from the 'sky' and lands at his feet is perhaps meant as a reminder that television functions as a legitimating force in the postmodern world, having the power both to confer and to destroy meaning.

One extremely ingenious aspect of *The Truman Show* is the inclusion, within the script, of a pseudo-realistic forum in which the finer points of the show are discussed by Christoff, its director, and questions from the 'viewers' are answered. Christoff's conviction that the immense and unfaltering popularity of the show is a reflection of the viewers' secret desires to 'be on television themselves' (73), corresponds closely to the theories of Baudrillard and other critics discussed above. Moreover, the fact that Truman is the only genuine and authentic part of the show – a unique 'True Man' in a counterfeit environment – is inspiring to audiences finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood in their own societies. Christoff goes on to justify what some see as his exploitation of Truman by calling into question the notion that reality and representation continue to exist as separate entities anywhere. 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players', he quotes, adding that the only difference between Truman's life and our own is that his is more thoroughly documented: 'He is confronted with the same obstacles and influences that confront us all. He plays his allotted roles as we all do' (80). Moreover, as he later explains to Truman himself: 'There's no more truth out there than in the world I created for you – the same lies and deceit' (106). Christoff's claim is also of significance to *Glamorama*, for it precludes any discussion about whether or not Victor really is acting or merely pretending to. The fact of the matter, as Christoff explains, is that reality has merged with its representation to such a degree that such distinctions are outdated and irrelevant.

Baudrillard describes a 1971 televisual experiment conducted on the Loud family in America who, like Truman, had their entire lives broadcast to the nation

for seven months of uninterrupted shooting, without a script or a screenplay. The experiment ended when a crisis erupted and the Loud family disintegrated, thus posing the inevitable question of whether or not the television itself was responsible. Baudrillard himself seems to think so, explaining that through its constant supervision it became the 'truth' of the Loud family (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 27-8) - a truth that inevitably amounted to a death sentence for them. While this conclusion may be applicable to Victor, scripted and shaped as his life is by the very obvious interjections of his director, however, Christoff denies that Truman is trapped in any way by the cameras following his every move. The major difference between Truman and Victor (and the Louds) is, of course, that Truman is absolutely unaware of his starring role and thus free from the feeling of claustrophobia that engulfs Victor from time to time when he realizes the extent of his monitoring: 'Everything's bugged. Everything's wired. Everything's being filmed' (348). Why, therefore, does he not attempt to escape as soon as he begins to suspect that something is amiss? The answer, according to Christoff, is that Truman prefers the comfort of his 'cell' to the potential freedom of the external world (80). Again this can be applied to Victor's situation, for surely he could also have escaped from the film crew using any number of his well-connected friends. What these texts illustrate, therefore, is that for many inhabitants of the contemporary world, a life narrated and controlled by repressive, external forces is infinitely preferable to the alienation and isolation offered by the alternative, a point also made in relation to a number of Pynchon's characters.

The forces of consumerism, advertizing and the mass media, which have been discussed above, achieve their ideal merger in the form of MTV, a station which more than any other addresses the: 'Desires, fantasies and anxieties of young people growing up in a world in which all traditional categories are being blurred and all categories questioned'²³. As MTV is a significant presence in Ellis' novels, a brief overview of its most important characteristics will be given before its effects on the characters themselves is discussed. The channel, which first went on air on the first of August 1981²⁴, became the fastest growing cable network in history.

²³ E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture* (New York and London: Methuen, Inc., 1987), 5.

²⁴ Pat Aufderheide, "The Look of the Sound". From Gitlin, ed., 115.

reaching 28 million American households within five years²⁵. Its success, according to Aufderheide, is based on its claim not merely to offer videos but environment, thus giving a sense of identity and of an improvised community to young people struggling to find a place for themselves in communities characterized by shopping malls and trivia²⁶. In spite of its obvious popularity among America's young, however, its critics are quick to dismiss its claims that it can offer any more than the most superficial of meaning to its viewers, drawing attention to its depthlessness by referring to it as: 'Empty Vee'²⁷.

The easy assimilation of MTV into the surrounding culture can be explained, according to Kinder, by the fact that it operates by using the same codes already forged by the rest of the mass media, although it highlights and exaggerates some of their most significant characteristics, in particular their relation to reality and the dream. Just as advertizing, as was discussed above, functions by connecting a product and a symbolic meaning or value, so too does MTV possess the power to evoke specific visual images in the mind of the spectator every time he/she hears the music with which they have been juxtaposed on television (3). The links between MTV and advertizing are many, and indeed MTV is described as a '24 Hour Commercial' by some critics²⁸. As Kinder explains, the primary function of the music videos shown on MTV is to promote and sell a product – the band they advertize. While most television presents its programs as the primary text and the commercials that interrupt them as secondary, MTV exposes the simulated nature of this arrangement by erasing the illusory boundaries within its continuous flow of uniform programming and revealing the central mediating position of advertizing by adopting its formal conventions as the dominant stylistic (2). In other words, everything on MTV – advertizing spots, news, interviews, and especially music videos – is a commercial. Ellis' characters frequently comment on the impossibility of distinguishing between the different components on MTV. Paul Denton, for example, complains: 'We watch another video or maybe it's a commercial, I can't

²⁵ Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 1.

²⁶ Gitlin, ed., 118.

²⁷ Margaret Morse, "Postsynchronizing Rock Music and Television", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Winter 1986), 15.

²⁸ Virginia H. Fry and Donald L. Fry, "MTV: The 24 Hour Commercial", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Winter 1986), 29.

tell' (*The Rules of Attraction*, 168); while Victor draws attention to MTV's merger of all aspects of contemporary life: 'MTV's on, Presidents of the United States merging into a Mentos commercial merging into an ad for the new Jackie Chan movie' (*Glamorama*, 90). More than any other form of television, therefore, MTV can truly be said to embody the ethos of the postmodern consumerist society.

As well as its similarity to advertizing, the continuous 24-hour flow of images is another of MTV's defining characteristics. While this is connected to its place within consumerism – the strategy of keeping us endlessly watching (consuming) in the hope of fulfilling our (unappeasable) desires – it also has a more sinister aspect: the abolition of history as a potential discourse. This abolition has primarily been achieved by MTV's refusal to give credence to the boundaries between different historical eras, flattening historical eras of music, for example, into its continuous, undifferentiated flow²⁹. By blurring previously distinct boundaries between popular and avant-garde art, different genres and artistic modes, past, present and future, MTV seems to exist in a 'timeless present' where history is but a construct. For this reason, MTV is described by one critic as 'a schizophrenic simulacrum', creating its world from a pastiche of cultural forms welded together with no mention of their original specificities³⁰. Of course, as Kaplan points out, this flattening out of distinctions has also placed the viewer in a kind of endless present not dissimilar from the schizophrenic state, which she defines as the experience of one who cannot take the tightened pressure of capitalism anymore: the sense of losing control and the sense of living without a future³¹. Given that Ellis' teenagers live their lives: 'Awash in a blizzard of ceaselessly circulating codes, clichés and slogans....by the light of MTV'³², it is interesting to examine the effect their exposure to the channel has had on them.

One thing that is very much in evidence is that keeping up with trends in music and fashion is considered crucial by Ellis' characters because it serves to keep them oriented within the otherwise fluid currents of popular culture. Benjamin, one

²⁹ E. Ann Kaplan, "History, the Historical Spectator and Gender Address in Music Television", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Winter 1986), 6.

³⁰ Kuan-Hsing Chen, "MTV: The (Dis)Appearance of Postmodern Semiosis", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Winter 1986), 66.

³¹ E. Ann Kaplan, "Sexual Difference", 121.

³² Young and Caveney, 35.

of the characters in *Less Than Zero*, chastizes a friend for not staying abreast of popular culture, claiming that this is the only way to survive in an otherwise unstructured world: 'You don't know what's going on, Kim....No, I mean, you really don't....I bet you don't even read *The Face*. You've got to....Otherwise you'll get bored' (96). Meanwhile, one of the characters in *The Rules of Attraction* is doing his thesis on The Grateful Dead, obviously in an attempt to connect himself to popular culture (32) – perhaps more significantly to culture that was popular during a simpler and less mediated time; while Victor, the narrator of *Glamorama*, not content with his frequent appearance in the society pages of magazines, auditioned – fruitlessly – for all three series of MTV's 'The Real World' (24), hoping perhaps that his immersion in MTV's quasi-reality would structure his life in a way that his own attempts – and those of his film crew – have not. The extent to which many young people's lives are under the control of MTV is also symbolized in *The Informers*, where one of the characters, Christie, acts like a string puppet who dances wildly while a video is playing, collapsing to the floor when it ends (152), as if to imply that her animation is intrinsically reliant on the television. Even more poignant is the character dying of anorexia, whose increasing proximity to death is mirrored by the waning sound of her music: 'Madonna's still playing but the batteries are running low and her voice is all wobbly and far off, spacey, and she's not moving, doesn't even acknowledge my presence (217). The most extreme example of this dependence on popular culture to provide a structured existence can be found in Patrick Bateman, who follows each of his most brutal murders with a long analysis of particularly bland pop music groups, like Genesis (133-6), Whitney Houston (252-6) and Huey Lewis (352-60). Although this practice could be interpreted as further evidence that Bateman is either mad or deceiving us about his brutality, it could also be regarded as a sign that he relies on the constant, calming presence of popular culture to draw him back to the world after his deviations into the underworld of murder (or at least into nightmares thereof).

The obvious problem with this dependence is, of course, that because the world constructed by MTV is but a heightened simulation of the world it represents, it is highly unlikely that it could contain any benefits for its audience. Characters like Clay, the narrator of *Less Than Zero*, who frequently looks to MTV for relief

from the confusion of his own life: 'I turn on MTV and tell myself I could get over it' (12), are inevitably disoriented even further by the continuous present and ever-changing images it broadcasts. The videos that constantly flash by do not help them blank out the anxiety they feel but rather heighten their disquiet and confusion. In these terms, therefore, MTV must be regarded as a negative force that underlines and heightens the sense of dislocation already haunting the characters.

Ellis himself is obviously fascinated by the phenomenon of MTV, for as well as exploring it through its effects on his characters, he also encompasses its structure into that of his novels. Annesley points to his tendency to eschew references to fixed times and places in favour of a narrative that locates its events in an empty and eternal present (90) – a style that reflects the undifferentiated flow of music from different historical eras on MTV. This is apparent, for example, in *The Rules of Attraction*, where the unframed narrative gives the impression that the book belongs within a sequence of ever-moving and fluctuating units, rather than being a closed narrative in its own right. Similarly, the events narrated in *American Psycho* are not always sequential, and segments relating to Bateman's life are often juxtaposed with reviews of popular music or long-winded descriptions of his possessions without any sense of differentiation. This modelling of a text on MTV reaches its culmination in *Glamorama*, a novel described by Cooper as following: 'Hilariously brittle pop-culture references fly by at the rate of anywhere from a handful up to dozens per page, all chronicled in an anxious, bemused manner that's pretty much the vernacular of the moment'³³. Not only does the text include many references to MTV: 'We went to the MTV Movie Awards' (110), but it presents Victor's life and its recording in such a way that neither we nor he himself are ever quite sure whether what we are seeing represents his reality or its representation. The fact that his emotion always seem to be accompanied by the most appropriate background music – Sinéad O'Connor's 'The Last Day of our Acquaintance' playing, for example, on the day he decides to leave the 'real' world and join the superficial world of models and celebrities: 'The future started mapping itself out...I was floating above the palm trees, growing smaller in the wide blank sky until I no longer existed' (481) – suggests not only its mediated nature, but also emphasizes

³³ Cooper. <http://www.ennui.clara.net/ellis/spin1.html>

that Victor is trapped within a world in which all aspects of his existence are continually controlled.

In the first half of this chapter, Ellis' novels have been situated within a postmodern world defined primarily by its privileging of surfaces and its collapsing of many traditional boundaries. The very dominant presence of the forces of consumerism and the mass media in the texts has been noted, and their influence both on the world inhabited by Ellis' characters and indeed on the structural composition of his novels discussed. The important question, however, is what effect a world so dominated by these forces has on the psyches of the characters. The second half of the chapter will address this question by examining the strategies employed by characters who are trying to define themselves amidst the turbulence and chaos of the surrounding world.

The characters generally react to the commodity- and sign-saturated world in which they live in two different ways: either by becoming lethargic and opting out of life or by turning to violence, options that will now be discussed in turn. The former is best illustrated in *Less Than Zero*, a novel whose characters are rich, indulged and beautiful, but also terminally depressed and directionless. For all the money and leisure accessories they have, all they finally manage to effect, as Freese points out, is their physical and psychological self-destruction through drugs and prostitution, with the result that: 'Although they appear to have everything, they really have "less than zero"'³⁴. One obvious reason for the depression experienced by many of the characters is that their reality has become mediated to such a degree that they have no control over the forces that continue to drive them further into chaos and isolation. The teenagers attending USC – University of Southern California, or, as they very appropriately put it themselves, the 'University of Spoiled Children' (13) – are thus doomed to fragmentation, alienated by their Cliff's Notes and their bootleg videos from any potential understanding of their society.

As Cummings points out, a prevalent feature of Ellis' work is that many of his characters are plagued by a sense of abandonment/emptiness and interchangeability. Despite assured monetary standing, the lives of these literary

³⁴ Peter Freese, "Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*: Entropy in the MTV Novel". From Reingard Nischik and Barbara Korte, eds., *Modes of Narrative: Approaches to American, Canadian and British Fiction* (Würzburg: Konighausen and Neuman, 1990), 70.

characters lack a sense of direction and purpose, and stripped of any possibility of emotional support from their friends and family, they are: 'Living their lives half-dead, bobbing afloat by holding on to cultural references'³⁵. *Less Than Zero* is accorded the dubious distinction by Tyrnauer of having defined the particular ennui of Generation X: 'Before anyone else knew what the hell was up'; reflecting: 'A certain kind of jaded, MTV sensibility that seems to imitate and incorporate everything it admires'³⁶. The reason for this widespread feeling of malaise, which was also discussed in the introductory chapter, stems, according to Boorstin, from a problem that is characteristically American: There is an obvious cure for failure, he says, that of Success. But what is the cure for Success? The over-achievement of people buoyed by a successful economy has led, he believes, to the creation of a common national ailment that is characterized not by misery, deprivation or oppression, but by malaise, resentment and bewilderment (*Democracy and Its Discontents*, xi-xii). Boorstin's theory is demonstrated in Ellis' own inability to handle the public adulation bestowed upon him after the publication of *Less Than Zero*, an inability that resulted in a nervous breakdown: 'I was not mature enough to sit around discussing myself....I couldn't handle it. Young success is a bad thing, a mistake, a freak of nature, it makes you feel the randomness and chaos of life'³⁷. Once again the boundaries between Ellis' experiences and his art are seen to collapse, and we are left to conclude that if Ellis himself found his life difficult to handle, it is little wonder that his characters are as frustrated and ineffective as they are.

The title *Less Than Zero* is taken from a song by Elvis Costello which, in its entirety, reads: 'Everything means less than zero' – an appropriate description of the novel's lack of a coherent centre. The fact that the book's title is thus second-hand - mirroring Costello's appropriation of rock 'n' roll's most famous icon's name - is revealing of the way Ellis' teenagers feel themselves to be at the *end* of things, as if the excess of previous generations has eroded all potential experience³⁸. The fact

³⁵ Ray Cummings. "Bret Easton Ellis And Why You Shouldn't Hate Him".
<http://www.ennui.clara.net/ellis/rc.html>

³⁶ Matthew Tyrnauer. "Who's Afraid of Bret Easton Ellis?" *Vanity Fair* (August, 1994). 72.

³⁷ Quoted in Gerard.14.

³⁸ See Young and Caveney. 21-2.

that even the classics of literature, such as Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, are accessible only at a remove through Cliff's notes is but one indication that all experience is now second-hand and mediated. Clay's friends are all rich, beautiful and popular, but also bored, purposeless and directionless, complaining that: 'There's not a whole lot to do anymore' (126). Every action and conversation is conducted in a vacuous manner and neither is ever invested with any sense of meaning or purpose: ' "Where are we going?".... "I don't know....Just driving".... "But this road doesn't go anywhere".... "That doesn't matter".... "What does?".... "Just that we're on it, dude"' (195). The disastrous vacation taken by Clay and Blair is another example that reveals very clearly the emptiness and the unappeasable hunger that lie at the heart of the book. The couple, as Young and Caveney point out, are young, rich, attractive and 'in love', and yet the conventional components of a happy romance – sun, sea, sex and champagne – are consumed within a couple of days, whereupon the return of boredom and restlessness causes them to turn away from each other and re-focus on the ever-present television which, ironically, will be selling them dreams of exactly the kind they are engaged in (37). It is no coincidence that the holiday taken by Bateman and Evelyn, in *American Psycho*, follows almost the exact same pattern, beginning blissfully: 'We went windsurfing. We talked only about romantic things....We took baths together....We had breakfast in bed' (280); only to sink once more into the banality of consumerist society: 'Soon we stopped lifting weights together and swimming laps and Evelyn would only eat the dietetic chocolate truffles' (281). It would appear that the excess of information and images with which society has become filled has abolished, or at least undermined, the possibility that a meaningful, unmediated connection can exist between two people. The problem, perhaps, is that seduced by the possibilities advertized on television, it is no longer possible to be satisfied with what they actually have.

This sense of alienation is one that suffuses *Less Than Zero* right from the first sentence - a remark by Blair that: 'People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles' (9), which haunts Clay's imagination for the rest of the novel: 'Though that sentence shouldn't bother me, it stays in my mind for an uncomfortably long time. Nothing else seems to matter' (9). Clay's feeling of isolation is further emphasized by the fact that there is nobody at home to greet him

when he returns from college for Christmas (10) and by the repeated observations by his friends that he looks pale and untanned and thus different from the rest of them: 'You look pale....This is the address of a tanning salon' (14); 'You look kind of pale, Clay. You should go to the beach or something' (17). The fact that a tan is all that precludes Clay's identification with his friends is yet another indication of the superficiality of the relationships portrayed throughout the novel. The meaningless nature of this method of identification is further emphasized by the fact that at the end of the novel Clay, although now homogeneously bronzed, is still feeling as isolated as ever.

One obvious reason for Clay's sense of alienation is that he has just returned home from his East coast college, a life about which neither we nor his friends are given any information. He drifts through his vacation with a deepening sense of disquiet at the pointless and drug-fuelled lives lived by his friends, although unable to arouse himself from his own apathy to do anything other than describe it in a lifeless tone of voice: 'There's a naked girl, really young and pretty, lying on the mattress....Spin digs the syringe into her arm. I just stare. Trent says "Wow". Rip says something' (188). Even if he did try to communicate his worries to his friends, it is unlikely anyone would have listened to him, for even his psychiatrist is self-obsessed and more interested in his own possessions than in helping Clay: 'He'll tell me about his mistress and the repairs being done on the house in Tahoe and I'll shut my eyes and light another cigarette, gritting my teeth' (25). This lack of communication is widespread among all of Ellis' characters, the most extreme examples appearing in *American Psycho*, where Bateman's frequent attempts to confess his crimes are either ignored or unheard. His confession to Evelyn that he decapitated her neighbour and is storing the head in his freezer, for example, is unacknowledged and does nothing to interrupt their discussion of dinner plans (118). In fact, Bateman is extremely dismissive of the theory that our lives are interconnected, claiming, on the contrary, that if he were to disappear his absence would go unnoticed: 'If I were to disappear into that crack....the odds are good that no one would notice I was gone. No....one....would....care....Our lives are *not* all interconnected. That theory is a crock' (226). Bateman's claims seem to be borne out in *The Rules of Attraction*, a novel described by Ellis himself as: 'A lazy, draggy

campus comedy about people misrepresenting other people's advances and affectations'³⁹. Here we are given contradictory accounts of the same relationships. Paul Denton, for example, gives us repeated details about his alleged affair with Seán Bateman: 'He stopped and breathed in and then kissed harder this time. Then we both leaned back, flat, on the bed, him slightly on top of me' (83); whereas Seán refers only briefly to the same night: 'Go to Denton's room. We drink some cold beer' (83), thus leaving us with no idea as to its true status. Not that it would matter anyway, for as Lauren Hynde emphasizes the belief that two people can really connect is but a fiction: '*Know* me? No one ever *knows* anyone. Ever. You will never *know* me' (227). Given this inability to forge a meaningful relationship with another human being, it is little wonder that the characters depend so heavily on their clothes and taste in music to define them and make them part of a social group.

Lauren's belief is reaffirmed in no uncertain terms in the attitudes the characters display towards sex. Bateman's inability to become intimate with Courtney due to his over-emphasis on consumer products was discussed in the introductory chapter. Even more telling are the frequent allusions made to couples, unable or unwilling to connect, who forego sex in favour of masturbating side-by-side: 'After a while I stop and reach over to her and she stops me and says no, and then places my hand back on myself' (*Less Than Zero*, 121). This is surely the ultimate indictment of a world whose inhabitants float past each other without ever really coming in contact. Ellis' novels are thus populated by isolated characters, speaking as if into a void, with no expectation of being heard or answered. Examples include a surfer who conducts a long phone conversation with nobody: 'He was pretending to be talking and that there was no one listening on the other end' (*Less Than Zero*, 200); and a girl in *The Informers* who writes a series of letters to someone called Seán, letters that disappear into the void never answered or returned: 'I feel like I might as well be stuffing them into bottles and tossing them into the Pacific off Malibu' (137). In fact it becomes increasingly apparent that these letters are far more self-indulgent than communicative, written for the sender's pleasure rather than the receiver's, much in the same way as masturbation has been seen to replace intercourse: 'I can fully understand you not having the energy or inclination

³⁹ Quoted in Tyrnauer, 73.

to write. But I hope you don't mind the onslaught of letters from my direction' (141). This corresponds very closely to Ellis' own description of his novels as consisting of a series of monologues – narratives existing in isolation from each other. His insistence that Clay could never possibly be regarded as a hero was discussed earlier in the chapter and further testifies to a condition of terminable apathy: 'That would always bother me when people would say "the hero of the novel". He isn't a hero at all to me. He's like this big void'⁴⁰. If Ellis himself is so pessimistic about Clay's chances for future enlightenment, then it seems unlikely that he will ever emerge from his apathy⁴¹.

The disaffection and ennui that suffuses *Less Than Zero* and *The Informers* is heightened by the fact that the end of the world does indeed seem to be approaching, a possibility that manifests itself in a number of ways. One of the characters in *Less Than Zero* has a dream in which: 'I saw the whole world melt' (103). Although this could, of course, be attributed to the widespread drug-abuse that pervades the book, it could also be a reference to the heat death of the universe. Freese points out that the novel is full of references to the almost unbearable heat of the contemporary Californian climate⁴²: Clay describes a Christmas in Palm Springs when it was so hot that: 'The metal grids in the crosswalk signs were twisting, writhing, actually melting in the heat' (69); he reads a newspaper article about a local man so overcome with the heat that he: 'Tried to bury himself alive in his backyard because it was 'so hot, too hot'' (198); and hallucinates about: 'Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun' (208). The malevolence of this imagery suggests that heat death is very much what Ellis believes to be in store for contemporary society.

The traditional entropic movement from diversity and difference to uniformity and sameness is also depicted in *Less Than Zero*, in which the characters are invariably young, tan and blonde: 'They all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them' (152). The answer to Clay's question is, as

⁴⁰ Quoted in Amerika and Laurence. <http://www.altx.com/interviews/bret.easton.ellis.html>

⁴¹ Interestingly, in the movie version of *Less Than Zero*, Clay does manage to quit drugs, breaks out of his apathy and tries to inspire his friends to lead similarly worthwhile and fruitful lives.

⁴² "Entropy in the 'MTV' Novel?" From Nischik and Korte, eds., 81.

Freese remarks, that: 'Of course, he does'⁴³. Ironically, Clay began the novel at odds with his friends: 'You look kind of pale' (17). His progress through the novel, therefore, is not towards a more healthy skin tone as his friends believe, but rather towards the state of equilibrium that heralds impending death. It is interesting that Clay is often regarded as superior to his friends because he goes to college in the East, a situation that suggests that he is open to different influences and experiences. This would appear to imply that Clay is not trapped within a closed system like his friends. However, the similarity between his apathetic Californian life and his apathetic college life, which is depicted in *The Rules of Attraction*, suggests that the East and West coasts of America might themselves be reaching a state of equilibrium, possibly due to the fact that the transmission of the same television programmes throughout the country has overridden many of the differences that traditionally existed between them. This is a point that was also made in the introductory chapter. The possibility that there is thus no escape from the closed system into which America has evolved is further underlined in *American Psycho*, a novel framed by references to entrapment: 'ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE' (3); 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT' (399). Perhaps Clay is correct to feel threatened by the billboard message that reads: 'Disappear Here' (38), for all the indications suggest that the world depicted by Ellis is drifting ever further along the entropic road to death.

Besides the general indications that Ellis' universe is running down, death is ever present in the novels through the numerous allusions made to vampirism and brutality on the parts of the characters themselves. One section of *The Informers*, for example, is narrated by a vampire who displays astonishing similarities with Patrick Bateman by juxtaposing graphic descriptions of his murders: 'I'm screaming on top of her, the mattress below us sopping wet with her blood and she starts screaming too and then I hit her hard' (177); with descriptions of the 'new customized coffin' he has had specially built to fulfil his requirements: 'FM radio, tape cassette, digital alarm clock, Perry Ellis sheets, phone, small colour TV with built in VCR and cable (MTV, HBO)' (182). The high incidence of violence among Ellis' characters will be discussed later in the chapter, but first, I would like to briefly examine the fear that

⁴³ Ibid. 82.

seems to be both a motivation for and a result of the surrounding brutality, and goes hand-in-hand with feelings of ennui in many of the characters.

If Clay's ennui and sense of alienation are awakened by Blair's remark that: 'People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles' (9), then the other seminal statement that colonizes his imagination is the message 'Disappear Here', which he reads on a billboard and which awakes in him all manner of fear and paranoia: 'Even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard....I keep looking into the rearview mirror, getting this strange feeling that someone's following me' (38-9). From this point on, Clay is a nervous wreck, scared even of his own reflection: 'I'd catch a glimpse of my eyes in the rearview mirror, sockets red, scared, and I'd get really frightened for some reason and drive home quickly' (69). Nor does the surrounding environment do anything to reassure him, for he is bombarded by rumours of friends who have disappeared in an area werewolves are said to haunt (77); warnings to keep his cats indoors at night to protect them from prowling coyotes (192); television re-runs of programs such as *War of the Worlds* (78); and music reminding him of the geological perils of living in LA: 'My surfboard's ready for the tidal wave....Smack, smack, I fell in a crack....Now I'm part of the debris' (45-6). The violence inherent in the surrounding environment, therefore, is both a natural consequence of living in L.A., a city located on a major fault line, and a frame of mind fostered by the ubiquitous mass media, which constitute not the benevolent presence sometimes depicted in DeLillo, blessing its subjects with thoughts of transcendence, but rather an aggressive combative one, forcing the characters to ingest its apocalyptic images.

Annesley insists that the general sense of wastefulness and ennui, which pervades much of 'blank fiction', is the source of the apocalyptic mood which generates both fear and a capacity for violence (110). Winnberg, on the other hand, points to the sense of randomness detailed in the epigraph to *The Rules of Attraction*: 'The facts even when beaded on a chain, still did not have real order. Events did not flow. The facts were separate and haphazard and random even as they happened....no sense of events unfolding from prior events'⁴⁴ as being extremely significant to our interpretation of *American Psycho*, for he claims that Bateman's

⁴⁴ This epigraph is from Tim O'Brien's novel *Going After Cacciato*.

brutality is a natural consequence of an existentialist world in which: ‘God is not alive’ (*American Psycho*, 375) and the concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ no longer apply⁴⁵. A common criticism of the theory of existentialism is that by collapsing the distinctions between categories of actions – good and evil, important and trivial – it can propel society into chaos, a situation realized in *American Psycho*, where Bateman appears unable to distinguish either between commodities and women: he picks up one prostitute standing under a sign reading ‘MEAT’ (168) and orders another over the phone using his gold American Express card (170); or between consequential events like murder and trivial ones like daytime television. This last tendency is best illustrated when, having killed a delivery boy, he begins to reminisce on the subject of that morning’s *The Patty Winters Show*: ‘Place the order over the dead kid’s face and shrug apologetically, mumbling “Uh, sorry” and recall that *The Patty Winters Show* this morning was about Teenage Girls Who Trade Sex for Crack (181) – a topic that provides yet another example of the commodification of the person. Given that Bateman’s personality seems to have been fractured irrevocably: ‘There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory’ (376), thus achieving the existentialist ideal of the disappearance of the self, it is perhaps inevitable that he will continue to move further away from what we traditionally recognize as human and humane, thus making it impossible for him to break the circle of anguish and insanity. The final words of the Novel: ‘THIS IS NOT AN EXIT’ (399) appears to indicate that this will indeed be the case.

Many of the characteristics of existentialism described above – in particular the widespread blurring of boundaries – are also, of course, associated with the postmodern world in which Ellis’ novels are set. The next section of the chapter will argue that the violent behaviour exhibited by characters such as Bateman is intrinsically connected to the dominant forces in their surrounding environment, in particular the forces of consumerism and the mass media which, by flooding the world with empty and meaningless signs and images, contribute significantly to the increasing chaos of the contemporary world.

⁴⁵ Jakob Winnberg, “This is Not an Exit”. <http://www.ennui.clara.net/ellis/essay.html>

Certainly this is not the first time I have argued that violence is an inevitable consequence of the increasing rationalization of the world through an emphasis on consumerism, for this is a development also central to the novels of Pynchon and DeLillo. Weber has famously claimed that bureaucracies, which he compares to cages in which people are trapped and their basic humanity denied, are one source of the violence and aggression that permeate contemporary society⁴⁶. This link, as was illustrated in the chapter on Pynchon, has already been proved in relation to the Nazi Holocaust, which Weber describes as a product of a rationalized world, combining the calculated destruction of humanity with the most efficient mechanism for doing so. It is, of course, no coincidence that Bateman, who Brooker describes as: 'A limit case of the unchecked and unopposed schizophrenia, loss of affect and loss of reality' which characterized the 1980's (44), is himself a cog in the machinery of bureaucracy. The idea of linking Wall Street, whose locution for success is 'killing' and whose favoured technique for it is the 'plundering and dismemberment of asset-rich corporations', with a succession of random murders and mutilations was, according to Zaller, both an inspired and an inevitable one⁴⁷. The fact is that both late capitalism and serial murder involve what he calls: 'Extreme forms of depersonalization in which all predators as well as victims are ultimately rendered faceless, action is reduced to function, and events seem randomly spewed out by a process whose design is inscrutable and whose purpose appears to be the mere reproduction of itself' (320). If this theory is taken on board, one conclusion that could be reached is that because Bateman's violence amounts to a bi-product of bureaucratization, he is the victim rather than the perpetrator of his actions.

Zaller's theory is supported to a certain degree by Annesley, who agrees that Bateman's work on Wall Street and his: 'Daily encounters with computer screens spilling digits with only a tenuous connection to the concrete values they represent' has created a sense of fictional and material unreality that weakens his grip on the real and renders him incapable of seeing his actions in anything other than fictional

⁴⁶ See Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, 21.

⁴⁷ Robert Zaller, "American Psycho, American Censorship and the Dahmer case", *Revue Francaise d'Études Américaines*, no.57 (July 1993), 320. The stock exchange in which Bateman works is, of course, a far cry from the epitome of order and calm it represented for Lyle Wynant, in DeLillo's *Players*: 'In the electronic clatter it was possible to feel that you were part of a breathtakingly intricate quest for order and elucidation' (28).

terms (17). Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the brutality and depravity of Bateman's world is far more extreme and irreversible than that experienced by Sherman McCoy, in Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, who also worked on Wall Street – in fact at the same firm, Pierce and Pierce! - only a few years previously. The fact that the fundamental source of McCoy's turmoil is obvious (the accident and attempts by black activists to make a racially motivated crime out of it) means that redemption is ultimately available for him. By the time Bateman is suffering from his unidentifiable and thus unshakeable angst, however, the traditional relationship of cause and effect has been polluted to such a degree by the proliferation of mass media images that it is unclear whether he will ever again recover from his disintegration.

Another clue that Bateman's violence has its origins in consumerism is the fact that his wellbeing seems to be dependent on material possessions. This is best illustrated in his fury when his new business card: 'Barney's, \$850' (44) is overshadowed by those of his companions, a fact that fills him with anger and causes him to suffer an anxiety attack: 'Suddenly the restaurant seems far away, hushed, the noise distant, a meaningless hum, compared to this card' (44). His alleged murder of Paul Owen, the only victim known to Bateman and thus the only crime with a conscious motivation behind it, is similarly the result of his resentment that Owen managed to secure the 'Fisher account' (49) and is thus more successful than Bateman himself. His inability to control his consumerist desires functions, therefore, as a microcosm – albeit an extreme one – of a society in which everything is consumable. Interestingly this is a point brought very much to the fore in Mary Harron's recent movie adaptation of *American Psycho*, in which the importance attached by the Bateman character to owning the right commodities and being seen in the correct social milieu is constantly stressed. Ellis' intention, according to Annesley, is thus to offer violence as a metaphor for the processes of commodification he sees as infiltrating, objectifying and dismantling the social body of late twentieth-century America (20). Bateman himself is also being used as a symbol of how desensitized our culture has become to violence for although he becomes distraught when he can't place the designer of a suit, he remains utterly unmoved by the brutality he describes in such graphic detail.

There is, as was mentioned above, a certain amount of support for the theory that the murders allegedly committed by Bateman are merely symbolic, products of his own imagination rather than of any blood-lust, representing perhaps a warning of how dangerous the consumerist madness of society could become. There are a number of points within the novel at which the reader is offered a choice of alternative explanations for some of Bateman's actions – stains on his sheets, for example, could be either blood or food-stains (84) – and thus nudge us towards two completely different conclusions about him. His report of his murder of Paul Owen also casts some doubt on his credibility, for not only does he claim to have 'effortlessly' swung the body into a taxi and up four flights of stairs to Owen's apartment (219) – surely a feat of superhuman strength – but we are also given numerous accounts of people claiming to have met Owen in London in the following weeks: 'I had...dinner...with Paul Owen...twice...in London...*just ten days ago*' (388). The final nail in the coffin of Bateman's credibility comes in the extraordinary 'Chase, Manhattan' chapter, in which he goes on the rampage, killing indiscriminately in all directions, his victims including a saxophone player (348), a young Iranian cab driver (348), a police officer (349), a janitor (351), and so on. One of the problems with this passage, as Young and Caveney point out, is that Bateman appears to be exhibiting the behaviour of both a serial killer and a mass murderer, two quite different types who have never been known to coexist in the one person (115). The fact that Bateman seems to regard himself in the third person while he narrates this section: 'Patrick keeps thinking there should be music, he forces a demonic leer, his heart thumping...Patrick's finger pulls the trigger' (349), also suggests that these events could be imaginary – a flight of brutal fantasy with Bateman himself in the starring role. These are signs obviously ignored by Ellis' detractors, who preferred to impose a moral reading on the book rather than to recognize its engagement with a world of pure surfaces. Interestingly, some observers believe that the reaction to the novel was a consequence not so much of the violence it portrayed, but rather of the fact that its alleged perpetrator is successful, popular and of high social standing. This is an interesting observation as it appears to indicate that Bateman's critics, like his colleagues in the novel, regard a commanding position within consumerist society as a shield against all allegations

of misbehaviour⁴⁸. This would appear to further support my argument that the superficiality of Ellis' text makes it the perfect allegory for contemporary consumerist society.

Another way in which Bateman's violence can be linked to the surrounding environment is related to a point made in an earlier chapter in relation to a number of Pynchon's characters that an excess of information or signs in the surrounding environment can cause meaning to be destabilized and the individual psyche to become paralyzed. This warning manifests itself in *American Psycho* where it is clearly the overabundance rather than the lack of choice available that causes Bateman to lose his grip on reality. This is illustrated, for example, in the near-nervous breakdown he suffers when trying to select a video from the vast array on display: 'Suddenly I'm seized by a minor anxiety attack. *There are too many fucking videos to choose from*' (112). The excesses of a consumerist society also appear to have made it impossible for Bateman to interpret anything except as a commodity, with the result that murdering a woman becomes as easy and as natural for him as eating a pizza or buying a camera. The further collapse of distinctions between fact and fiction, which is a characteristic of a society suffering from information overload, is revealed in his inability to separate his murders from day-time television (304); in his description of his crimes in the third person, thus placing himself in the position of spectator rather than perpetrator (349); and, finally, in our inability to deduce whether his narrative is true or false. The feeling of dislocation and alienation promoted by this excess of information has meant that drastic measures must be found in order to ground the self. Bateman's response to the situation in which he finds himself is an obsessive focus on the body, and in particular on the infliction of pain. He admits himself that his murders constitute for him the only reality in an otherwise mediated world: 'I'm loosening the tie I'm wearing with a blood-soaked hand, breathing in deeply. This is my reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw' (345). His explanation about why he always

⁴⁸ This assertion is supported to a large degree by Wolfe who indicates that public opinion against McCoy, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, was certainly influenced by his high social – and by extension moral – standing within the community: 'The vilification poured forth from every channel. Prominent Wall Street investment banker, top echelon at Pierce and Pierce, socialite, prep school, Yale....' (549).

videos his victims as they are tortured and eventually murdered by him: 'As usual, in an attempt to understand these girls I'm filming their deaths' (304) makes it clear that his violence constitutes a desperate, and ultimately futile, attempt to find some sense of meaning beneath the surface of a society rendered depthless by the forces of the mass media.

An important component of Bateman's brutality is thus the voyeuristic pleasure he takes in it. This is a trait he shares with a number of his co-characters, who also derive great pleasure from coming in contact with scenes of violence or destruction. Clay's sisters, in *Less Than Zero*, for example, display great excitement whenever they pass a road accident, always pleading for an opportunity to have a closer look: 'A car lays overturned, its windows broken, and as we pass it, my sisters crane their necks to get a closer look and they ask my mother, who's driving, to slow down' (67). Similarly, when one of the narrators in *The Informers* visits the site where his father's aeroplane has just crashed, he insists on being photographed next to the wreck: 'I stand against a rock next to the ranger as the Cessna specialist hesitantly takes some photographs of us that I want' (166); while in *The Rules of Attraction*, Paul Denton decides to recount the (untrue) tale of a friend's death in a car accident as part of his (seemingly successful) seduction of Seán: 'I used the dead best friend story....I kept my head lowered, tingling with excitement' (80). Obviously the combination of violent death and technology is an irresistible combination as far as the majority of Ellis' characters are concerned.

This coupling of violence and spectacle reaches its climax in Ballard's novel *Crash*⁴⁹, which is thematically close enough to *American Psycho* to merit a brief discussion of its main characteristics. It is appropriate that the director of its screen adaptation, David Cronenberg, was one of the few who spoke out in favour of *American Psycho*, praising it for highlighting the fact that its brutality represented an attempt to achieve a sense of meaning in a superficial world: 'You invent a world where clothes and money and brand names are the value system and you are in the mind of someone who is locked into that. But inside that mind there is an awareness

⁴⁹ J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995 – orig. pub. 1973). Although *Crash* is a novel written by a British writer in the 1970's, its reinvention as a movie by American director David Cronenberg in 1996 and widespread influence on other contemporary American novels and movies makes it an appropriate text to discuss in the context of Ellis' fiction.

that it is all meaningless and artificial, completely invented. And the murders, the hideousness, are an attempt to break out of that, to try to shatter it and to connect with something real'⁵⁰, because this is also the agenda that also informs *Crash*. What is important to realize, as Sinclair points out, is that although closely based on Ballard's novel, Cronenberg's movie incorporates some significant changes that relate it specifically to end-of-century America. His world is, in fact, recognizable as that in which Ellis' characters also live: 'It belongs to a climate of pre-millennial boredom. It's a novella of the last days'⁵¹. In this context, it is significant that Cronenberg chose Toronto as the location for his movie, for unlike the recognizable London of Ballard's novel, Toronto is generally described as: 'The paradigm of North American cities (although it's not recognized like all the others)'⁵². This mixture of familiarity and anonymity makes it a perfect symbol of the blurring of distinctions that characterizes the postmodern world.

One important point about the various sexual acts that happen in the course of the movie is that they clearly do nothing to bring the characters closer together – a situation that mirrors the many examples of disinterested sex in Ellis. This is symbolized, as Sinclair points out, by the fact that Cronenberg's couples never face each other during sex but rather stare out of the frame until it is over (47). The more extreme among them even forego human partners, experimenting instead with the different ways in which a crash could result in injury to the genitalia, thus achieving a true merger with technology. This phenomenon was previously discussed in relation to Pynchon, whose characters also occasionally choose mechanical partners over other human beings as part of their bid to transcend their humanity. Although this generally leads to a slow process of objectification (as with V who gradually becomes more mechanical), the merger is occasionally violent. Gottfried's death in the Schwarzgerat, at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, is described in brutal, though erotic, terms similar to those used by Vaughan to explain the pleasure he derives from his own self-inflicted injuries: 'The car crash is a fertilizing rather than a destructive event – a liberation of sexual energy that mediates the sexuality of those

⁵⁰ Quoted in Tyrnauer, 101.

⁵¹ Iain Sinclair, *Crash* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 57.

⁵² Quoted in Sinclair, 87.

who have died with an intensity impossible in any other form'⁵³. What all of these characters are doing is striving towards what Springer calls 'technoeroticism' - the intersection of technology and eroticism (3) - in an attempt to achieve the same feeling of connection and meaning for which Bateman looks in his cannibalized bodies. Given the lack of depth that characterizes the worlds of *Crash* and *American Psycho*, and the unstoppable entropic progression of Pynchon's novels, however, it is unlikely that the characters will ever succeed in their quests for meaning.

Another trait shared by the characters of Ballard/Cronenberg and Ellis is their intrinsic need to have their violence validated by the mass media. In the same way in which Bateman often videotapes or photographs his treatment of his victims, so too do the formers' characters receive a much more intense sexual charge if they are being filmed. In fact, being filmed soon becomes a precondition for orgasm among Ballard's characters: 'I had felt the same fall in excitement. Without Vaughan watching us, recording our postures and skin areas with his camera, my orgasm had seemed empty and sterile, a jerking away of waste tissue' (120). For Cronenberg's characters, living as they do in a world in which much of life is being filmed anyway, the fantasy that their acts are being recorded is enough: 'Did you fantasize that Vaughan was photographing all these sex acts? As though they were traffic accidents?' (38). Another significant difference between the texts is that Ballard's characters are very much haunted by the presence of Elizabeth Taylor and the world of Hollywood glamour she symbolizes. In many ways, Vaughan's frequent 'accidents' are but rehearsals for the day he hopes to die alongside the movie star: 'During the last weeks of his life Vaughan thought of nothing else but her death, a coronation of wounds he had staged with the devotion of an Earl Marshal' (7). The fact that his eventual death (ironically, 'his one true accident') happens within metres of her limousine – although without her participation – could be an indication that the forces of the mass media were willing to validate his life's work. The absence of Taylor from the scene of Vaughan's fatal accident in Cronenberg's movie, however, suggests perhaps that meaning and significance are no longer attainable in a postmodern world comprized more of gaps than connections. The message at the heart of Cronenberg's movie, therefore, appears to

⁵³ David Cronenberg, *Crash* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996), 42.

be that even the most violent merger between sexuality and technology can no longer ward off the feeling of widespread alienation – a discovery also made by the ever-searching, never-satiated Bateman.

Given the multiple similarities that exist between *American Psycho* and *Crash*, it is appropriate that their publications were greeted with the same outrage and horror – *Crash* of course received a second round of criticism when its screen version was released in 1996. Interestingly, the decision made by top publishing-house Simon and Schuster to break the contract they had with Ellis to publish *American Psycho* is not unlike the attempt made by Ted Turner, another dominant force within mainstream American culture, to ban the release of *Crash* on video in America (in fact he succeeded in delaying its release for a year)⁵⁴. Ballard's explanation for the controversy caused by his novel is almost identical to Ellis', for he claims that the fact that he did not situate the text within a reassuringly moral frame was one of the reasons people were so outraged. Finally, just as the source of the public outcry against *American Psycho* was questioned by some critics who believed that Ellis' merger of violence and the cut-throat world of late capitalism might have been too close to the bone, so does Ballard believe that the response to *Crash* indicates that it too struck a nerve. He remarks himself that: 'People seem to be really excited by car crashes or filmmakers wouldn't film them'; while Cronenberg admits: 'The problem with car crashes is that they're so damned difficult to film! Filmmakers wouldn't make all this effort if they didn't think people were getting a thrill from them'⁵⁵. The world-wide preoccupation with the morbid details of the car crash in which Princess Diana died in 1997, as well as the huge demands for the photographs of her body still entangled with the car (photographs of the nature Vaughan delighted in) in spite of the prurient and extremely hypocritical condemnation of the photographers who took them, is a further indication that the issues raised by Ballard and Ellis about the nature of violence in the postmodern world – its voyeuristic quality and its rooting in the forces of the market-place – are

⁵⁴ Chris Hall. "Future Shock". <http://www.spikemagazine.com/1197ball.html>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

both true and in widespread evidence throughout society⁵⁶.

In the course of this chapter, I have conducted an examination of the forces of consumerism and the mass media which are widely believed to shape and mould the contemporary world, and have concluded that the ennui and violence into which Ellis' characters have variously fallen are their inevitable bi-products. Nor does their embrace of these behaviours do anything to help his characters achieve a sense of identity or belonging. On the contrary, the more lethargic Clay becomes and the more violent Patrick Bateman becomes, the more fragmented and alienated an existence they lead. The problem, as the novels reveal, is that a dependence on the empty signs and signifiers of consumerism has grown to such an extent that the integral identities of the characters themselves have been deconstructed. This results in the widespread lack of individuality witnessed among Ellis' characters. The blurring of Clay and his friends into one homogenous blonde and tan mass was discussed earlier in the chapter. A similar fate befalls Patrick Bateman, for not only are we never quite sure whether or not the murderous deeds described are his own, but his identity is also a matter of some doubt. In spite of the aggressive nature displayed to us, for example, none of his friends believe he has the capacity for such evil, dismissing him as 'the boy next door' (20) or 'the voice of reason' (37). Even when he confesses his crimes into his lawyer's answering machine, his claim is dismissed as 'hilarious' because: 'Bateman's such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody' (387) that he could not possibly be culpable. Alongside these conflicting accounts of his personality, Bateman is also frequently misrecognized and mistaken for someone else. His own explanation for this confusion about his identity is that 'Patrick Bateman' exists only as an abstraction: 'There is no real me, only an entity, something illusory' (376). As a 'noncontingent human being', whose personality is 'sketchy and unformed', he appears to disappear and dissolve, and no matter how often he analyzes his behaviour it is clear that the

⁵⁶ This is further underlined by the plethora of media representations devoted to the role of violence in postmodern society. Of particular note is Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* (released as a movie in 1999), which examines the emergence of bare-fisted boxing among a large group of disaffected professionals, who come to depend on their weekly dose of this primal activity to wake them out of the numbing stupor of their commodity-filled lives. As the central protagonist of the novel explains: 'You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club'. Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 1997), 51.

absence of depth and meaning in his world will preclude the possibility of putting his fractured psyche back together again: 'Even after admitting this...and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*' (377). The main reason that Ellis' novel – and his psychopath – lacks a moral centre, therefore, is because the structures that could uphold it have collapsed.

In many ways, Victor, narrator of *Glamorama*, has everything Patrick Bateman wants – a glamorous job, a beautiful girlfriend and automatic entry into the most exclusive clubs and restaurants, something that was always a source of anxiety for Bateman: 'I'm on the verge of tears by the time we arrive at Pastels since I'm positive we won't get seated' (39). In fact the superiority of his social standing in relation to Bateman is illustrated by the fact that the latter has to procure an invitation to the club Victor is opening and is very polite to him when they happen to meet: 'Patrick Bateman, who's with a bunch of publicists and the three sons of a well-known movie producer, walks over, shakes my hand, eyes Chloe, asks how the club's coming along' (38). In spite of this and the fact that he achieves the Baudrillardian ideal of a life validated by the media, however, Victor is even less sure about his identity than Bateman. He is similarly misrecognized and mistaken for someone else. After a long and seemingly coherent conversation with his agent, for example, we realize that his agent thinks he has been talking to 'Dagby' all along and seems never to have even heard of Victor (30). He also seems to suffer from the same feeling of homogeneity as Clay, because when he looks at his reflection in some glass covering an advertizement for Armani, he feels that he is merging with and disappearing into the model on the poster: 'I catch my reflection superimposed in the glass covering of an Armani Exchange ad and it's merging with the sepia-toned photo of a male model until both of us are melded together' (94). At first, this constant misrecognition seems to be nothing other than yet another example of the apathy and lack of interest that characterizes many of Ellis' characters. When Victor becomes trapped in Europe as a result of his roles in an indeterminate number of movies, however, it begins to seem increasingly sinister. An acquaintance, for example, insists that they had dinner together in New York recently: 'Last

Tuesday....At Balthazar. A whole bunch of us. You put it on your card. Everyone gave you cash' (331), and moreover that many of the issues that were unresolved before Victor left for Europe have now been sorted out: 'You and Damien patched things up, the club's a resounding success' (332). The one problem with this optimistic account is, of course, that Victor has been nowhere near New York in recent months.

What is most significant about Victor's sense of separation and alienation from his own identity is the central role played by technology in its production. The mystery of his apparent dual existence stems from recent advances, for it is through the 'magic' of the computer that files have been prepared of pictures of him superimposed into groups of family and friends in various locations: '“VICTOR” Dogstar concert w/K Reeves'; '“VICTOR” New York, Balthazar', and so on (357). The implication is that in a world in which all experience is mediated, and all human contact superficial, a photograph of 'Victor' dining with friends is more than enough to convince them that he really was present. The plot thickens, however, when after a tearful reunion with Chloe in Paris, she mentions a night they had allegedly spent together recently in New York: 'Four weeks ago I was in London....Four weeks ago I was not in New York', thus leading Victor to the inevitable conclusion that an impostor has assumed the role of 'Victor Ward' in New York while he himself remains trapped in Europe (412). The ease with which this new 'Victor Ward' takes over the role – to the extent that Chloe does not realize she has had sex with a stranger – is a chilling testament to both the fluidity of identity and the lack of meaningful connections between people in the depthless postmodern world.

Victor's entrapment within his movie scripts and separation from the identity he once thought was his is, in a sense, a reflection of the way Ellis treats all of his characters, for he continually draws our attention to the lack of psychological and emotional depth with which he has invested them. The frequency at which they reappear in his various novels is astonishing. As well as narrating *Less Than Zero*, Clay also appears briefly as a student in *The Rules of Attraction* (182); Patrick Bateman, narrator of *American Psycho* also turns up as the brother of Seán Bateman in *The Rules of Attraction* (233) – a visit reciprocated by Seán Bateman in *American Psycho* (224) – as well as in *Glamorama* (38), in which Seán is also mentioned

(183); and Victor, Lauren and Jaime, all characters in *The Rules of Attraction*, go on to 'star' in *Glamorama*, although the character we come to know as 'Lauren Hynde' is subsequently revealed merely to have assumed the role, the original Lauren having died in a car crash years earlier (425). The novels also share a huge cast of seemingly interchangeable minor characters who contribute to this lack of differentiation. This blurring of distinctions between the various novels has a few important consequences. Firstly, it confirms Patrick Bateman's prediction at the end of *American Psycho* that: 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT' (399), for although free to slip from one novel to another, the characters are nonetheless limited to the world portrayed within them. It also implies the triviality of human existence, for having been the only voice in *Less Than Zero*, Clay hardly merits a sentence when he appears in *The Rules of Attraction*⁵⁷. This triviality is further emphasized when, in spite of the claustrophobic nature of the world inhabited by the characters and the fact that they are thrown together with some regularity, they never seem to recognize each other, even if they allegedly shared an intimate relationship in the past. Instead they 'slide down the surface of things', meaning no more to each other than the endless litany of famous names chanted throughout *Glamorama*. Indeed, Ellis does his best to convince us of their lack of depth, doing very little to give them any kind of individuality. In one striking example, two of the characters in *The Rules of Attraction*, Scott and Ann, have almost exactly the same conversation – about Ann's decision not to drink and subsequent change of mind under pressure from Scott: 'I'll be daring and have a rum and Diet Coke' (257) – as they do at another restaurant with a different couple in *American Psycho*: 'Listen. I'll be *daring*... I'll have a Diet Coke with *rum*' (97). In addition, another part of their conversation, relating to 'Californian Cuisine', which features in both *The Rules of Attraction* (256) and *American Psycho* (94), is repeated almost verbatim by another couple, Stephen and Lorrie, in *Glamorama* (213). Ellis' intention is obviously to make the point that his characters' do not have significant individual identities but are, rather, interchangeable and superficial. He reinforces this point further by situating them firmly within a fictional world: Patrick Bateman, for example, works at Pierce and

⁵⁷ Oedipa Maas' stature as the heroine of *The Crying of Lot 49* was similarly undercut when she was given a one-sentence mention in *Vineland*.

Pierce, which is also Sherman McCoy's investment firm in Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*; and Alison Poole, heroine of Jay McInerney's *Story of My Life*, appears in both *American Psycho* (207) and *Glamorama* (12)⁵⁸. The implication for the reader is obvious: in a world ruled by the forces of consumerism and the mass media, all reality is mediated and all existence relegated to fiction.

An interesting feature of Ellis' novels is that each works to systematically quench any hope that may have remained at the end of the previous one. In *Less Than Zero*, for example, the 'hope' – Clay's salvation as it were – lies on the East Coast, in college education, a possibility that evaporates amidst the apathy and disaffection of *The Rules of Attraction*. Moreover, the adult world of work, mature relationships and a career in New York to which some of the characters turn at the end of *The Rules of Attraction* is quickly and comprehensively destroyed in *American Psycho*. In spite of the fact that *Glamorama* appears to follow the same pattern by implying that the validation of life by the mass media, for which many of the characters in the earlier novels longed, does not lead to any sense of meaning or stability, however, Ellis seems to regard it as a relatively optimistic novel. In an interview, he explains that while his earlier fiction was written at a time when he believed life was but a series of random, unconnected facts, he has subsequently come to believe that it does have a structure after all: 'The older I've gotten, I realize that lives do have narratives....They do have arcs. When you're twenty-three, you tend to see the world as a series of random events that happen'⁵⁹. This change of opinion is reflected in the structures of his novels: *Less Than Zero* and *The Informers* are far less coherent narratives than sequences of loosely connected and random monologues; *The Rules of Attraction* is an unframed narrative, beginning and ending suddenly in the middle of sentences: 'and it's a story....' (13); '....my hand squeezing her knee, and she' (283); while *American Psycho* assures us that there is no way of escaping the chaotic world in which we have become entrapped: 'ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE' (3); 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT' (399). In contrast, *Glamorama*, according to Ellis, was written with a clear sense of progression in mind. One of his first decisions about the novel was that it would

⁵⁸ See Young and Caveney, 108.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Chris Heath, <http://www.ennui.clara.net/ellis/stonel.html>

begin with the word 'specks' and end with the word 'mountain', and that there would be a clear connection between the words, so that unlike the aimless, directionless lives of the earlier characters, Victor's life was going to progress along a clear trajectory⁶⁰. Presumably the huge difference in scale between a speck and a mountain is supposed to symbolize a progressive increase in Victor's knowledge and self-awareness throughout the course of the novel. In this case, Victor's replacement by a clone in the superficial world of modelling from which he originated and the cutting of his role from the various movie scripts are obviously meant to be regarded as positive developments.

In the final scene of *Glamorama*, Victor sits staring at a mural which has a mountain as its central feature. Behind the mountain is a highway, along which are billboards with 'the answers' on them. Victor has a vision of himself ascending the mountain, reading all the answers and moving confidently into the future: 'I'm surging forward, ascending, sailing through dark clouds, rising up, a fierce wind propelling me....The future is that mountain' (482). The fact that the chapter numbers in all other sections of the novel count backwards – Section 1 from chapter 33 to chapter 0, for example – suggesting a progressive fall towards nothingness perhaps, with the one exception of this final section, is another indication that Ellis is being serious when he suggests that Victor does indeed have an optimistic chance of a future. Moreover Grossberg insists that postmodern billboards, such as those in Victor's mural, are empowering because they constitute little reminders to us that we are alive and that we should continue to struggle to remain so: 'They are...like the 'tags' of hip-hop culture, marking sites of investment and empowerment'⁶¹. In spite of this optimistic assessment, however, I am not convinced of the viability of Ellis' hopes and Victor's chances because of one intrinsic flaw in Victor's euphoric vision. There is no doubt that he does have the vision. My argument concerns its nature: His mountain is part of a mural and therefore no more than a representation of the real thing – if indeed there is a real thing. There is thus no more depth to Victor's mountain than there is to any of the other representations, like brand names and designer labels, which were dismissed in the course of the novel. Furthermore,

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Lawrence Grossberg. "Putting the Pop Back Into Postmodernism". From Ross, ed., 181.

the answers Victor is so confident of receiving are displayed on advertizing billboards, a medium also proved to be superficial and lacking in any relation to authentic values or truths. In fact, in the belief and trust he displays in these advertizing messages, Victor demonstrates that he really has not progressed from the situation in which Clay – also haunted by messages on billboards – finds himself in *Less Than Zero*. In the same way that the sense of hope of each novel was subsequently destroyed in the next, Victor's chosen means of salvation in *Glamorama* could be regarded as turning full circle back to *Less Than Zero*, the point at which Ellis started. In a sense, Ellis' fiction as a whole thus represents the kind of closed system described by Pynchon and Farina. In spite of Ellis' expressed optimism about Victor's fate, therefore, I would argue that the fact that he locates his sense of meaning deep in the heart of the mediated culture of the postmodern world means that he has no more chance than the rest of the characters of escaping from the forces of consumerism and the mass media which control and regulate external reality in order to forge a meaningful and authentic future for himself. An inevitable corollary, perhaps, is that neither do we.

Chapter 4: Douglas Coupland.

‘And so the time came. The seventies were over. With them left a sweetness, a gentleness. No longer could modern citizens pretend to be naïve. We were now jaded; the world was spinning more quickly’ – *Girlfriend in a Coma*.

The over-riding impression of the contemporary world as it is depicted in the fiction of the authors I have discussed so far is of a society numbed and hollowed by the plethora of commodities and media images that flood it. Although many contemporary Americans appear to have fulfilled traditional dreams of prosperity, their possessions no longer seem to have the power to comfort them, a point made by many observers including Vice President Al Gore: ‘The accumulation of material goods is at an all-time high, but so is the number of people who feel emptiness in their lives’¹. The salve for this emptiness, as I illustrated in relation to the fiction of Pynchon, DeLillo and Ellis, is often found in violence. Douglas Coupland is an interesting author with which to conclude this thesis for he insists that an alternative is available. His own efforts to come to terms with the rapid changes that characterize the modern world are most apparent in *Polaroids From The Dead*, a collection of factual and fictional articles and photographs gathered together in order to illustrate the moods and trends that define the last decade of the twentieth century: ‘Back in 1990, North American society seemed to be living in a 1980’s hangover and was unclear in its direction....I hope the photographic imagery in the book will help accentuate this feeling of riffling through evocative old missives’ (1). Mirroring these authorial intentions, his characters constantly strive towards new ways of defining and extending themselves in relation to the surrounding environment. Whereas the demographic group on which he focuses is often dubbed ‘The Lost Generation’ or ‘The Blank Generation’ – an apt name certainly for Ellis’ apathetic teens – Coupland prefers to regard the tendency of his own

¹ Quoted in *Polaroids From The Dead*, 161. Because Coupland’s novels focus on American, rather than North American, society, I will discuss them in the same context that informed previous chapters. I will, however, return to the issue of Coupland’s nationality towards the end of this chapter.

characters to drop out of mainstream society as positive and life-affirming. Speaking about 'Generation X', the term he is often (wrongly) credited with coining, he stresses that 'X' suggests possibility rather than social exclusion: '(X) is an inherent unknown....To be X is to have a limitless range of self-expression....to be yourself'². When his protagonists opt out of the system, therefore, it is not to lose themselves in drugs like Ellis' characters, but rather to recreate themselves so that they might survive – and even prosper – in the contemporary world.

One notable characteristic of Coupland's fiction is his invention of words and phrases meant to serve as definitions of many contemporary phenomena. The characters in *Generation X*, for example, speak of the prevalent problem of 'Option Paralysis: The tendency, when given unlimited choices, to make none' (139), a condition illustrated by Ellis' Patrick Bateman who almost loses his mind when trying to select a video: 'Suddenly I'm seized by a minor anxiety attack. *There are too many videos to choose from*' (*American Psycho*, 112). Coupland's characters appear better able to cope with this situation than Bateman, for when commodities become too plentiful to describe they simply adapt their language accordingly: 'It seems everybody's trying to find a word that expresses more bigness than the mere word "supermodel" – *hyper model-gigamodel-megamodel*' (*Microserfs*, 206); 'Anna-Louise and I are speaking to each other in Telethon-ese....Telethon-ese is all about acceleration' (*Shampoo Planet*, 28). They even seem to have come to terms with the many confusing aspects of postmodernism, adapting its theories to describe the world as it appears to them. Susan, one of the *Microserfs*, for example, echoes Baudrillard's definition of hyperreality when she explains the world in terms of multiple images existing in isolation in a simulacrum: 'The BIG issue nowadays is that on TV and in magazines, the images we see, while they appear surreal, "really *aren't* surrealistic, because they're just random, and there's no subconscious underneath to generate the images'" (44). Given the faith expressed by many of DeLillo's characters in the mythical power of language: 'You don't see the thing because you don't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names' (*Underworld*, 540), it would appear that the ability

² Quoted in Karen Pakula, "Culture Shock". *Time Out* (1-8 April, 1992), 27.

displayed by many of Coupland's characters to name and define contemporary social phenomena greatly increases their chances of survival. It is ironic, therefore, that they are subject to the same feelings of dissatisfaction and loneliness often displayed by the characters of Pynchon, DeLillo and Ellis. In this concluding chapter, I will examine both the underlying sources of these feelings and the strategies adopted by characters wishing to overcome them in order to participate fruitfully in contemporary life. I will begin once more by looking at the role played by consumerism, the mass media and other communicating technologies like the Internet.

It is no surprise that 'Generation X' was quickly adopted as a catch-phrase by advertizers hoping to cash in on the fifty million young Americans aged between eighteen and thirty which it encompassed³. Even Coupland himself was targeted: he was invited to do an ad for The Gap, which he refused, although he did do some voiceovers for MTV⁴. Generally speaking, Coupland's characters are pleased that they are the focus of so much attention by advertizers. Even *Generation X*, a novel in which the three main protagonists drop out of the frenzied pace of the corporate world to seek some inner peace: 'I needed a clean slate with no one to read it. I needed to drop out' (31), celebrates the legitimating power of advertizing: 'I was both thrilled and flattered and achieved no small thrill of power to think that most manufacturers of life-style accessories in the Western world considered me their most desirable target market' (19). Although an occasional reference is made to the objectification often associated with consumerist society: 'Sometimes I wish I was a skeleton. No skin. So I didn't have to feel like an object' (*Polaroids From The Dead*, 23), the characters are usually happy to submit to its standards. Tyler Johnson, narrator of *Shampoo Planet*, derives great comfort from his vast collection of hair-care products: 'First-Strike® sculpting mousse manufactured by the pluTONium™ hair-care institute of Sherman Oaks, California. It's self-adjusting, with aloe, chamomile, and resins taken from quail eggs. Gloss, hold *and* confidence. What a deal' (7); while Daniel Underwood, one of the *Microserfs*,

³ This group is estimated to be worth about \$125 billion in spending power! See "alt.culture". <http://www.altculture.com/aentries/g/genx.html>

⁴ Douglas Coupland. "Generation X'd". *Details* (June 1995). <http://imv.au.dk/~bogus/frames.html>

confesses to a weakness for anything new: 'I don't like shopping but I *am* a new product freak. Slap a "NEW" sticker onto an old product, and it's in my cart' (80). This widespread obedience to the dictates of advertizing is also illustrated by the almost identical clothes worn by many of the characters: 'I shouted, "*Gap check!*" and everyone in the office had to guiltily 'fess up to the number of Gap garments currently being worn' (*Microserfs*, 270); 'Ryan, a Gap clone – khakis, white T-shirt with flannel shirt on top'⁵. The triumph exhibited by Karla, the only 'Gap-free soul' among the *Microserfs*: 'For the remainder of the day wore the smug, victorious grin of one who has escaped the hungry jaw of bar-code industrialism' (270) may appear to suggest that Coupland's characters are unhappy about their submission to advertizing. Evans even suggests that the characters of *Shampoo Planet*, a novel he describes as 'the Shopping Mall Novel', are secondary to the commodities that flood the text: 'Coupland has invented characters he has no real interest in and then fitted them up with a plot that lights not their emotions, but his own love affair with the by now tedious ectoplasm of American material culture'⁶. Evan's claim is obviously comparable to Lehman's dismissal of Ellis' novels as possessing: 'All the intellectual nourishment of a well-made beer commercial' (72), which was discussed in the previous chapter. Again the lack of critical engagement with Coupland is striking – and surprising considering the wide-spread usage of phrases such as 'Generation X' which he popularized. This lack of interest, as Evan's comment suggests, is indicative of a feeling that his novels, like those of Ellis, lack depth. Whereas this is undoubtedly true of the latter who, as was illustrated, deliberately portrays a depthless world peopled by superficial characters. I would argue that Coupland, on the other hand, does invest his characters with more psychological and emotional depth. Although Evans is right to emphasize the dominant role played by commodities in Coupland's fiction, therefore, I believe he incorrect to suggest that the characters are somehow subordinate to these commodities. Certainly Tyler Johnson's obsession with his shampoos is comparable to Ellis' Patrick Bateman, who uses his vast collection of cosmetics to try to shield himself from the horrors of the

⁵ Douglas Coupland. *Miss Wyoming* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 116.

⁶ Julian Evans. "Review of *Shampoo Planet*". *The Guardian* (6 April, 1993). <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

outside world. Coupland's characters do not give the impression that they are so vulnerable, however. On the contrary, their extensive and up-to-date information about the most recently developed products suggests that they are well equipped to survive in the contemporary world. Daniel Johnson's admission that he and the majority of his co-workers are 'Gap victims', therefore, is almost certainly meant to be taken ironically, particularly given that they have managed to escape from Microsoft, one of the most powerful corporations of all, in order to set up their own competing software company. Although Coupland is acutely aware of the dominant presence of commodities in the contemporary world, therefore, he is confident that his characters have the ability to use whatever products they need without falling prey to their controlling power.

Rushkoff suggests that another appropriate name for the demographic group on which Coupland focuses is 'Screenagers', which draws attention to the fact that they are the first generation born into a culture largely mediated by television and computers (*Children of Chaos*, 3). As I illustrated in the introductory chapter, television has effectively usurped many of the roles traditionally played by parents and educators, its many functions including: 'Third parent, second teacher, entertainer, informer....babysitter....'⁷. Coupland's interest in the media is apparent not only through its presence in his novels, but also through the influence a number of media stories have had on his own imagination. Most notable is his constant reference to the story of Patty Hearst, a millionaire's daughter kidnapped by terrorists in 1974 and later brainwashed into becoming part of their organization, who was famously captured on security cameras taking part in an armed robbery. Her story is told in *Life After God*, where she is depicted as a victim of the consumerist mentality: 'Becoming locked in the world's imagination as a sacrifice to middle-class longing – looted by the forces who would strip our world of tennis shirts and French lessons and gourmet mushrooms' (241); and her ransom note is somewhat cryptically reprinted in *Microserfs* (108-9). Coupland's explanation as to why Patty Hearst's story had such an effect on him echoes DeLillo's sentiments about the assassination of President Kennedy, for what

⁷ Palmer et al. 279.

both authors emphasize is the way in which the emotions stemming from these incidents are unique to a certain generation: 'When Patty Hearst was kidnapped in 1974, it was like Marcia Brady was kidnapped. That's true child-of-the-70's stuff. It's like a real demarcation point. Do you care about Patty Hearst or not?'⁸. Coupland's interest in media stories continues in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, which is based on an article from *Newsweek*, entitled "A Long Twilight Comes to an End". The article tells the tale of Karen Ann Quinlan (Coupland's coma victim is Karen Ann McNeill) who fell into an unexplained coma in 1977 and remained so until her death in 1986⁹. The fact that the novel's title is taken from a song by 1980's band The Smiths is further confirmation that Coupland is very much influenced by popular culture.

If Coupland's novels can be described as 'Shopping Mall Novels' due to their inclusion of many popular brand names and advertizing slogans, so too can his writing be hailed as: 'A hymn to the catch songs, TV programs, brand names and slogans that colonize our inner lives'¹⁰, for it abounds with references to popular television programs and movies. Such is the influence some of these programs have on his characters that they inspire the creation of new words and phrases. *The Brady Bunch*, for example, with which many of the characters are obsessed, has given rise to definitions like: 'Bradyism: A multisibling sensibility derived from having grown up in large families' (*Generation X*, 134); and 'Operation Brady', which is the name given by Susan Colgate to her plan to find the perfect house in which to raise her son (*Miss Wyoming*, 263). Elsewhere, characters indulge in 'Tele-Parabalizing' – the use of incidents from sit-com plots to deal with real life situations: 'That's just like the episode where Jan lost her glasses!' (*Generation X*, 120); and become depressed when their lives fail to live up to their media-based ideals: 'I used to get depressed because our relationship wasn't more like a beer commercial' (*Shampoo Planet*, 35). They also display many of the same symptoms of over-exposure to the media as characters discussed in previous chapters. Tyler

⁸ Quoted in Scott Timberg. "In *Life After God* Coupland Eschews His *Generation X* Irony". *The Baltimore Sun* (2 March. 1994). <http://imv.aau.dk/~bogus/texter/life/020394.html>

⁹ Heather Mallick. "Generation EX". *Toronto Sun* (15 March. 1998).
http://cmtcanada.com/JamBooksReviewsG/girlfriend_coupland.html

¹⁰ Peter Jukes. *New Statesman and Society*. Quoted on dust jacket of *Microserfs*.

mirrors the reluctance expressed by many of DeLillo's characters to watch television in someone else's presence due to the personal nature of his interaction with the medium: 'Watching TV with another person is vaguely embarrassing – you feel like you're partially on display – like you're riding in a glass elevator at the mall' (*Shampoo Planet*, 26). Coupland also supports Baudrillard's theory that only events verified by the media are regarded as fact in the contemporary world. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, for example, the characters derive immense pleasure from repeatedly watching a video of the first CNN pictures of the end of the world, recorded minutes before the television station went off air itself forever: 'Every human activity has shut down – hospitals, dams, the military, malls. All machines are turned off. Once again they watch the CNN VHS tapes Karen recorded earlier that afternoon before the power failure' (197). They obviously find these mediated images more palatable and more interesting than the evidence they themselves can see first-hand as the only remaining survivors of the human race. Similarly, in *Miss Wyoming*, Susan Colgate's miraculous escape from a plane crash becomes real for her only when she watches footage of the crash site on the television news: 'The events on TV seemed more real to her than did her actual experience' (19). The fact that a group of blind people asks one of the narrators of *Life After God* to take a photograph of them on the basis that: 'They still believed in sight. In pictures' (338), is an indication of just how important a legitimating role the media play in the lives of Coupland's characters. This is an important point as it shows that Coupland's characters are the inheritors of a certain legacy passed down to them by writers such as Pynchon and DeLillo, whose characters also frequently experience difficulty in distinguishing between the mediated and the 'authentic'. As the next section of this chapter illustrates, however, Coupland's characters have also managed to transcend the restrictions of this legacy and are forging a new way forward for themselves.

Although the examples cited above point to one of the arguable benefits of the media – namely their ability to package our experiences in such a way as to make more sense to us – Coupland's characters crucially are not blind to their manipulative tendencies. When the newly recovered Karen is getting ready to be interviewed about her experiences, for example, she is advised by a friend that it is her appearance rather

than what she says that is all important: 'TV isn't about information. It's about emotion' (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 160). The truth of this statement is illustrated by the concerted attempt made by the interviewer to direct Karen towards the kind of answers she wants to hear: 'Karen realizes that Gloria wants to present a plucky, back-from-the-brink-of-death woman, eager to sing the praises of the new and changed world' (163). Even if Karen's predictions about the end of the world had not been edited out of the sequence, however, it is unlikely that they would have survived their mediation by television, for, as Pynchon also frequently illustrates, everything transmitted is subject to distortion: 'Karen, so emaciated in real life, looked almost fashionably thin. So what they say about cameras adding ten pounds is true' (189). What angers Coupland's characters most about this mediation of reality are the very obvious attempts made by the media to create false memories among the population. In *Generation X* this phenomenon is called: 'Legislated Nostalgia', and defined as: 'To force a body of people to have memories they do not actually possess' (41). This manifests itself in the impossibly high ideals to which some of the characters aspire: 'These *Life*-ish images are now, of course, the images that have come to define the probably-never-existed-anyway ironic norm of the Cold War Boom culture: Dad smoking a pipe; Mom in an apron. It's beyond a joke' (*Polaroids From The Dead*, 123). The fact that the characters seem so susceptible to these images even though they realize they are false is a testament to the degree to which they continue to be controlled by the forces of advertizing and the mass media.

The cumulative effect the many media images in the surrounding environment have on Coupland's characters is a widespread confusion. Jared, the ghostly narrator of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, describes what he claims is the dominant sensation for many end-of-millennium people: 'The faint buzzing noise in your ears, a heaviness on both sides of your skull, and the sensation that your brain is twitching inside your cranium like a fish on a beach. This is the opposite sensation of clarity' (247) – a description clearly drawing on the metaphor of white noise. Indeed the progression of a media-saturated society towards entropy is suggested throughout the novel both in the general blurring of the characters' identities: 'I have always noticed in high school yearbooks the

similarity of all the graduate write-ups – how, after only a few pages, the identities of all the unsullied young faces blur, how one person melts into another and another’ (32); and in the overwhelming feeling that traditional distinctions between reality and representation have been leveled: ‘What I notice...is that everybody’s kind of accusing everybody else of *acting* these days. Know what I mean? Kind of, uh, not being *genuine*’ (82). Such is the situation that one of the characters in *Life After God* despairs of ever regaining a sense of truth: ‘I try to be sincere about life and then I turn on a TV and I see a game show host and I have to throw up my hands and give up’ (286-7). No matter how hard the characters try to escape from the pervasive presence of the television, therefore, it appears to have infiltrated every aspect of their lives.

One possible solution is, of course, to try to insulate oneself from the surrounding images: ‘I am choosing to live my life in a permanent power failure. I look at the screens and glossy pages and I don’t let them become memories’ (*Polaroids from the Dead*, 112). Given that the decision to opt out of popular culture led only to further isolation when it was attempted by DeLillo’s characters, however, it is not clear that this is a feasible strategy. Indeed when John Johnson, one of the protagonists of *Miss Wyoming*, attempts to erase his past as a movie producer by dropping out of society completely: ‘He’d wanted those rocks and highways and clouds and winds and strip malls to scrape him clean. He’d wanted them to remove the spell of having to be John Johnson’ (212), he fails and almost dies of food poisoning in the process. This discovery that the freedom and peace traditionally offered to those who went ‘on the road’ into uninhabited parts of America is but an empty myth by the end of the twentieth century was also made by many of DeLillo’s characters. What is significant about Coupland’s most recent novel, however, is that the media are also represented as a source of transcendence and empowerment for the characters. On another occasion, John comes close to dying once again and is saved by a vision he has of a woman who encourages him to take better control over his life: ‘So then go clean your slate. Enter your own private witness relocation program’ (30). The mythical force of this vision is undermined somewhat when John realizes that what he actually heard was none other than the sound of his television: ‘He suddenly realized that his vision of Susan’s face

was a rerun that had been playing on his bedside TV, and it meant nothing' (173-4). What is important, however, is that John does eventually meet Susan in person, and the fulfilling relationship on which they have embarked by the end of the novel is indeed likely to be the source of his salvation. His vision was thus no less transcendent because of its mediation by television. Susan herself also demonstrates that television is by no means as omnipotent as it might appear, and indeed that it can be used to further one's own end. She also manages to drop out of society for over year, and uses her status as a famous actress to carefully orchestrate her return to life on her own terms: 'She made a point of looking directly and forlornly into all of the cameras, knowing that the police department might well earn enough to finance a new fleet of patrol cars from selling the footage she was generating for them' (264-5). Her control over every aspect of her reappearance indicates that it is possible to be empowered, rather than enslaved, by the media. As with consumerism, therefore, although Coupland is aware of the many potentially detrimental effects of the media, he remains confident that his characters are strong enough to overcome their power and use them to improve their lives.

The analogy drawn by Zach, narrator of Rushkoff's *The Ecstasy Club*, between the now omnipresent '@-sign' and 'the fetus, the Internet address, the DNA strand viewed from above...the cosmic spiral'¹¹ is an extremely appropriate one as it mirrors the prevalent opinion that one of the dominant characteristics of the 'brave new world' inhabited by Coupland's characters is the recent explosion of technological innovations, in particular communication media such as the Internet¹². So intrinsic has the connection between one's identity and one's computer become that Daniel, one of the *Microserfs*, defines the changes in his life in terms of his new e-mail address: 'I am danielu@microsoft.com' (3); 'I am now daniel@oop.com' (232). He even goes so far as to suggest that it is through our e-mail addresses that we will be known in the future: '“@” could become the “Mc” or “Mac” of the next millennium' (232). This gradual colonization of identity by technology is in fact one of the first changes to strike Karen

¹¹ Douglas Rushkoff, *The Ecstasy Club* (GB: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 205.

¹² Coupland's own interest in computers is demonstrated by the publication, in 1998, of *Lara's Book: Lara Croft and the Tomb Raider Phenomenon*, which charts the success of the popular computer game and its star.

when she awakes from her coma in 1997: ‘The whole *world* seems to be working too hard....They talk about their machines as though they possess a charmed religious quality’ (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 142). Indeed many of the characters do refer to their machines in terms of awe and even of endearment. Karla, one of the *Microserfs*, for example, admits that: ‘When I was younger....I went through a phase where I wanted to be a machine’ (72); while one of the pages of her partner Daniel’s journal – a page, incidentally, written in the computer language of binary code – reads: ‘This is my computer....My computer is my best friend. It is my life’ (104-5)¹³. Even Karen herself owes her life to the various machines that performed her bodily functions for her as she lay comatose: ‘The machinery of her new life was fully set in motion – the IVs, the respirator, tubes, and wave monitors’ (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 29). One of the most frequent charges leveled against recent technological developments is the dehumanization that many critics see as its inevitable bi-product. As early as 1960, Daniel Bell, for example, was warning about: ‘The regulated, functional man (who) emerges as a new type, hard and ruthless, a cog in the technological press’¹⁴. Indeed, at many stages throughout her coma, Karen appears to her friends to be just that - a cog connecting the various machines: ‘The food goes in one tube and out another....Think about how her body is like an earthworm, kind of a big food-to-compost converter’ (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 41). The almost irrelevant part played by Karen in this scenario appears to support Hamilton’s declaration that: ‘It’s not up for debate. We lost. Machines won’ (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 142), for it appears that it is the machines, rather than Karen herself, who are alive. This last example is, of course, reminiscent of the badly injured ‘soldier in white’ in Heller’s *Catch-22*, whose comatose form is hooked up to so many drips and machines that one onlooker remarks: ‘Why can’t they hook the two jars up to each other and eliminate the middleman?....What the hell do they need him for?’ (281). The similarity between these images is interesting because it indicates that Coupland is both aware of, and willing to engage with, issues raised in this seminal American novel. It also suggests that his fiction can be discussed not only in the context

¹³ For a full translation of these pages see www.imv.au.dk/~bogos/frames.html

¹⁴ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), 24.

of the novels of Pynchon and DeLillo, as is argued in this thesis, but in relation to a wider number of American texts published since the 1960's.

In spite of Coupland's tendency to describe his characters in technological terms: 'We emerge from our mother's womb an unformatted diskette; our culture formats us' (*Polaroids from the Dead*, 122), however, I would argue that this statement of Hamilton's is not symptomatic of his beliefs as a whole. In fact, he repeatedly makes the point that machines are built by humans and are, therefore, servants rather than masters: 'I mean, people from outer space didn't come down to earth and make machines for us...we made them ourselves. So machines can only be products of our being' (*Microserfs*, 228). Rather than submitting to the rather pessimistic viewpoint of theorists such as McLuhan, who believed we have become the victims of our own technology - compelled to answer a phone whenever it rings, for example¹⁵ - Coupland seems determined to *use* technology in order to discover, rather than to enslave, humanity: 'What is it about our essential *humanity* that we are expressing with our inventions? What is it that makes us *us*?' (*Life After God*, 12). Technology, in Coupland, thus represents a key to unlocking his characters' identities, rather than a tool for repressing them.

It is in his appropriately named *Microserfs*, a novel that traces a group of disaffected Microsoft workers who, upon realizing that they don't 'have lives' in this oppressive environment, set off to make their own way in the new electronic order, that Coupland most thoroughly examines the reciprocal relationship he sees as existing between his protagonists, self-confessed 'computer geeks' (2) and their machines. The novel is hailed, on its dust-jacket, by *New Statesman and Society* for articulating the 'profound theme of how at the micro level, we are all slaves to the information that bombards us', and indeed its characters, as was pointed out above, do exhibit a tendency to allow brand names and television programs to shape their perceptions of themselves and the world at large: 'They watched Martha Stewart tapes and felt guilty for not orchestrating their lives more glamorously' (214). Their attitude towards

¹⁵ Cited in Rushkoff, *Children of Chaos*, 204.

technology, however, is not that of victims but of experts aware of the opportunities for the advancement of the human race now available: 'Our species currently has major problems and we're trying to dream our way out of these problems and we're using computers to do it. The construction of hardware and software is where the species is investing its very *survival*' (61). One of the primary benefits offered by computers is their facility to store vast amounts of data, with the result that we have access to more information than we could possibly assimilate ourselves in the course of a life-time: 'We've reached a critical mass point where the amount of memory we have externalized in books and databases....now exceeds the amount of memory contained within our collective biological bodies' (253). The benefit of this, as Micheal explains, is that we have an opportunity to learn from historically documented mistakes: 'It means we're no longer doomed to repeat our mistakes; we can edit ourselves as we go along, like an on-screen document' (253). This belief is at the heart of Daniel's project to create a 'subconscious file' in his computer, for although the words and phrases he types in may appear to be unconnected and random: 'Ziggy Stardust....We're just friends....Wells Fargo....Death Star....Kraft Singles....' (54), he is working on the principle that it is only by gathering these spontaneous thoughts that he will come face-to-face with his own true being. As his counterpart in *Life After God* explains: 'If we were to collect these small moments in a notebook and save them over a period of months we would see certain trends emerge from our collection – certain voices would emerge that have been trying to speak through us' (255). If Daniel's efforts come to fruition, therefore, we would certainly have to acknowledge the truth of Michael's statement and conclude that it is possible for technology to have an extremely liberating effect on the human consciousness.

Coupland's optimism is not shared by many theorists, including McLuhan, who claimed that technological progress always corresponds with biological or cultural decay¹⁶ – a view also articulated by Karen, who notices that: 'The world became faster and smarter and in some ways cleaner....but....people *devolved*' (*Girlfriend in a*

¹⁶ See Rushkoff, *Children of Chaos*, 203.

Coma, 214). One of the reasons for the caution expressed by many observers is that although modern technology can give rise to: ‘The beginning of a truly professionalized and caring society....which has ready access to knowledge’, it also potentially leads to: ‘A tightening of control over the citizenry’¹⁷. The extent to which every aspect of life is recorded by a variety of surveillance devices is illustrated in *Miss Wyoming* in which the most private details of Susan’s life are accessible to those trying to find her: ‘Oh, grow *up*. The era of privacy is over. As I was saying, I was patterning her phone data....’ (169). Again, as was illustrated with regard to the media, Coupland remains convinced that technology represents a positive force, for it is by using the information derived from her phone data that John finds Susan and reunites her with her son. The reason modern communications technology can help to foster relationships between people is, according to Rushkoff, that while television often ‘deadens the senses and numbs the reflexes’, the interactive quality of computers heightens them – to the degree that the latter are increasingly used to reorient stroke victims¹⁸. This is the case at the end of *Microserfs* when Daniel’s mother suffers a stroke and learns to communicate with her family through a computer. Her new abbreviated language: ‘GR8. I LK MY BODY’ (369), reminiscent of Daniel’s experiments with his computer’s ‘subconscious file’, imply that technology does indeed foster genuine communication: ‘Mom speaking like a license plate....like a page without vowels....like encryption. All of my messing around with words last year and now, well....it’s real life’ (370). The air of transcendence that suffuses her reemergence from silence: ‘Mom, part woman/part machine, emanating blue Macintosh light’ (369) indicates that the *Microserfs* were right all along to connect the survival of the human race with continued advances in communication technologies.

As I have illustrated in the first section of this chapter, recent advances in consumerism, the mass media and technology have contributed significantly to the shaping of the modern world as it is depicted in the novels of Douglas Coupland. His

¹⁷ Webster, *Theories of the Information Society*, 1.

¹⁸ Douglas Rushkoff, ‘The Computer Made Me Do It’, *The Guardian* (Thursday, 17 June, 1999). <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

characters exhibit an awareness and appreciation of these innovations, and a determination to use them to advance their careers and relationships. As well as influencing the world on this relatively superficial level, recent advances have also led to some drastic social changes. In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss some of the more dramatic of these developments, most notably the way in which many traditional structures, such as history, time and a belief in an omnipotent God, have been undermined and even dismantled. Central to my investigation will be the ways in which the characters come to terms with and survive the far-reaching consequences of these changes.

One of the most startling consequences of recent technological advances, as Baudrillard points out, has been their destruction of the concepts of time and history. The dizzying ‘acceleration of modernity’, he explains, has propelled us to ‘escape velocity’, with the result that we have: ‘Flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history’. In its place, we now have its representation, the television news report: ‘We shall never know again what history was before its exacerbation into the technical perfection of news: we shall never know again what anything was before disappearing into the fulfillment of its model’¹⁹. Coupland’s characters occasionally express a nostalgia for the less mediated past: ‘Before *history* was turned into a press release, a marketing strategy, and a cynical campaign tool’ (*Generation X*, 151). Generally, however, they are happy to participate in the undermining of the idea of history by indulging in some ‘Decade Blending’: ‘Sheila = Mary Quant earrings (1960’s) + cork wedgie platform shoes (1970’s) + black leather jacket (1950’s and 1980’s)’ (*Generation X*, 15). For many of them, history – and indeed time itself – has become commodified to such an extent that it can only be expressed in terms derived from the marketplace: ‘A Tricia Nixon dress – that’s *so* cool...History is cool’ (*Polaroids From The Dead*, 9); ‘It’s Friday – ‘jeans day’’ (*Microserfs*, 167). Such is the colonization of time by corporations in *Microserfs* that they seem to be becoming indistinguishable: ‘In the future, clocks won’t say three o’ clock anymore. They’ll just get right to the point

¹⁹ *The Illusion of the End*, 1. 6.

and call three o' clock, "Pepsi"" (131). Coupland is thus an advocate of Baudrillard's theory that recent advances have radically changed the concepts of history and time and, in many instances, rendered them obsolete.

There are a number of reasons why history and time should be discounted as structures in the contemporary world. One of the characters in *Life After God* claims that technological advances have shrunk the world to such a degree that time is no longer a consideration: 'I think it's the spirit of the age. All these machines we have now. Like phone answering machines and VCRs. Time collapses' (334). When the obliteration of the human race brings time to an end in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the repose is greatly enjoyed by the protagonists who now recognize the strictures they had been subject to in the modern world: 'Each new advance made by "progress" created its own accelerating warping effect that made your lives here on Earth feel even smaller and shorter and more crazed' (263). This idea that time is but a human construct is echoed by Baudrillard, who claims that the current undermining of history is not due solely to technological advancements, but is rather a consequence of the fact that: 'History itself has always, deep down, been an immense simulation model' (*The Illusion of the End*, 7). This is represented in the 'Legislated Nostalgia: To force a body of people to have memories they do not actually possess' (*Generation X*, 41) forced upon Coupland's characters by the media. Baudrillard also denies that this lack of faith in the concepts of history and time is a new one. On the contrary, the whole of history has had 'a millennial challenge to its temporality' running through it in the form of a faith in the after-life – a point that exists beyond both history and time and which manifests itself in the: 'Global fantasy of catastrophe that hovers over today's world' (*The Illusion of the End*, 8). This comes to a head in each one of Coupland's novels in the form of 'Mental Ground Zero', which he defines as 'The location where one visualizes oneself during the dropping of the atomic bomb; frequently, a shopping mall' (*Generation X*, 63). In *Life After God*, for example, we are presented with a collection of apocalyptic memoirs: 'I was by the fridge in the kitchen when it happened.... I was having my hair done when it happened.... I was in rush hour gridlock traffic in the middle of the three express lanes leaving the city when it happened.... I was at the mall when it happened.... I was in the

office and it was near the end of the day and people were getting ready to go home when it happened'²⁰. The sequence concludes with the message: 'We are not with you anymore....It is much later on, now' (127). Some of the characters have thus apparently managed to accelerate to 'escape velocity' and are now existing in a state beyond both time and history.

Girlfriend in a Coma is a particularly significant novel in the context of this discussion, for it addresses a number of key themes. For one thing, Karen's emergence from her coma after twenty years is a metaphor, as Mallick puts it, for: 'Something that has been foisted on us – 70's retro'²¹. The fact that many of today's fashions stem from the 1970's: 'Her hair is washed and styled in a manner considered fetching by 1997, and, for that matter, 1978, standards' (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 220) is indicative of the circular nature of time and perhaps of a kind of 'running down' of imagination. It is also significant that Karen wakes up just in time to prophesize and then to experience the end of the world. Although her mother, Lois, is actually at the mall when 'it happens' (182), the world, as Karen remarks: 'Was never meant to end like in a Hollywood motion picture – you know: a chain of explosions and stars having sex amid the fire and teeth and blood and rubies. That's all fake shit' (205). Instead the world literally falls asleep, with the exception of Karen and her friends who thus live to see the end of time, history and the mass media. What they eventually realize is what Baudrillard has claimed all along: that history and time are but human constructs and thus mere simulation: 'Other animals don't have time – they're simply part of the universe. But people – we get *time* and *history*....And now there aren't any people. Without people, the universe is simply the universe. Time doesn't matter' (235). A universe beyond history and time is thus possible because, as Coupland's protagonists discover, life will continue even if human beings and all of their constructions cease to be.

In a short story "Intimate Distance and the Power of Memory", Coupland returns to the idea that a computer's hard-drive serves as a metaphor for human memory. Echoing the assertion by the *Microserfs* that memory has now become

²⁰ *Life After God*, 115-125.

²¹ Mallick, "Generation Ex". http://www.cmtcanada.com/JamBooksReviewsG/girlfriend_coupland.html

externalized (insofar as the information stored in various databases now exceeds what we contain within our collective minds), Coupland claims that this situation has rendered history - if not dead - then decidedly beside the point. By corollary, the idea of defined periods of time, such as generations, are themselves irrelevant as each individual now has access to an unlimited number of influences, both past and present. The benefit of this situation, as the *Microserfs* also point out, is that we are no longer doomed to constantly repeat our mistakes: 'We can edit ourselves as we go along, like an on-screen document'²². *Girlfriend in a Coma* is essentially a dramatization of this point for when the protagonists fail to make any use of their time as the only remaining inhabitants of the world: 'Our lives have remained static – even after we've lost everything in the world – shit: the world *itself*. Isn't that sick? All that we've seen and been through and we watch videos, eat junk food, pop pills and blow things up' (256)²³; they are given a second chance and sent back to the beginning of the end of the world (the day Karen awoke from her coma) in order to rectify the mistakes they now recognize were made by humanity: 'If necessary, you're going to need to reject and destroy the remains of history – kill the past – if it hinders the truth' (271). In this sense, *Girlfriend in a Coma* is comparable to *Vineland*, *Mason and Dixon* and *Underworld* for they all encompass attempts to use the lessons of the past in order to succeed better in the future. Whereas the novels of Pynchon and DeLillo represent journeys into the American past by their respective authors, however, Coupland reverses this by bringing Karen, an inhabitant of the 1970's, directly into the future. This places her in a better position to help her fellow characters recognize their mistakes than the decidedly nostalgic recollections of Pynchon and DeLillo. Having pointed out their worst tendencies to her friends: 'There's a *hardness* I'm seeing in modern people. Those little moments of goofiness that used to make the day pass seem to have gone. Life's so

²² Douglas Coupland. "Intimate Distance and the Power of Memory".
<http://imv.au.dk/~bogus/frames.html>

²³ Interestingly, this schedule of looting and destruction is similar to the manner in which the characters in Vidal's *Kalki* spend their time when they too become the last remaining inhabitants of the world: 'Geraldine and I made the rounds of the famous dressmakers....I assembled a set of star rubies'. Gore Vidal. *Kalki* (US: Ballantine Books, 1978), 234. Again this similarity is interesting because it situates Coupland's novels in relation to a text other than those with which this thesis directly engages.

serious now' (153); 'A lack of convictions – of beliefs, of wisdom, or even of good old badness. No sorrow; no nothing' (213); she slips back into her coma where she continues to function as a kind of reminder to them of how bad life can become if they do not keep trying to improve themselves: 'I have to go back into my...*coma*...Unless I make it, none of you can go anywhere. That's what I saw, Richard. Back in 1979. This. Me – I'm your Plan B' (272-3). With Karen thus serving as their conscience, and Jared to help and guide them, it would appear that the protagonists of *Girlfriend in a Coma* at least have a chance to 'reformat' themselves and rewrite the future.

In spite of their discovery that time and history are but human constructs, Coupland's characters are nonetheless aware that life without their restrictions would be very difficult indeed. This is perhaps one of the reasons that Karen's relapse into her coma is a necessary precondition for the salvation of the world, for her presence will serve as some kind of structure for her friends. One of the pervading fears among the characters is of a condition called: 'Mid-Twenties Breakdown', which is defined as: 'A period of mental collapse occurring in one's twenties, often caused by an inability to function outside of school or structured environments coupled with a realization of one's essential aloneness in the world. Often marks induction into the ritual of pharmaceutical usage' (27). Although not applicable to the protagonists of *Generation X* themselves, who manage to live quite successfully in the Californian desert having consciously escaped from their over-structured former lives, this definition does describe the difficulties experienced by some of their counterparts in the other novels when they find themselves adrift in the vast world. One of the minor characters in *Generation X* explains that: 'The only reason we all go to work in the morning is because we're terrified of what would happen if we *stopped*. We're not built for free time as a species' (23). This is confirmed by the recently-separated narrator of *Life After God* who confesses: 'I have to remind myself that time only frightens me when I think of having to spend it alone' (18). This fear of the unstructured is particularly apparent in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in which the overwhelming feeling of emptiness: 'We're all working. We all have jobs but...there's something missing' (78) forces the characters to clutch at various straws in order to survive. As Karen notices when she rejoins the

living: 'Pam and Ham did smack – still *do*...because the notion of forty more years of time was, and continues to be, too much for them. Wendy lost herself in grueling routine. Linus apparently went away for years trying to figure out the meaning of life...Richard drank and placed all his hope in *me*' (215). Even Karen herself is hardly blameless, for it was in an attempt to avoid this fate herself that she fell into a coma. Nor was this a coincidence for comas, as Linus points out, are: 'A phenomenon of modern living...as modern as polyester, jet travel, and microchips,' and indicative of the prevalent mood of apathy (62). The protagonists of *Microserfs* are similarly terrified when they leave the hierarchically structured environment of Microsoft, where: 'Bill (Gates) is a moral force, a spectral force, a force that shapes, a force that moulds. A force with thick, thick glasses' (3); and find themselves the keepers of their own destinies, 'Nobody rules here in the Valley. No Bills. It's a bland anarchy. It takes some getting used to' (108). Regardless of the obviously simulated nature of such constructs as history and time, therefore, Coupland's characters continue to search for some kind of narrative that will protect them from the terrifying vastness of an unstructured world.

The idea that an omniscient God constitutes a structuring metanarrative is one that is generally rejected by contemporary theorists who insist that, like time and history, it is but a human construct. Baudrillard, for example, claims that belief in God is not a reflection of His existence but is rather there in His place, just as language is no longer merely a reflection of meaning but has actually replaced it (*The Illusion of the End*, 92). Rushkoff's summation of the situation is characteristically optimistic, for he claims that the reduction of the world to 'a single networked being' gives us the chance to experience: 'A direct connection with the forces of nature without the intermediary parental device of metaphor or authority'. In other words, if by losing God the 'children of chaos' lose the restricting but reassuring belief in damnation, evil and 'Big Brother', they also gain a willingness to participate in their own evolution on a personal, societal and even global level, using the new tools available to them to help them make their 'personal navigational choices' (*Children of Chaos*, 262). It is unfortunate that Rushkoff's optimism does not translate into his own fiction, for the young people, in *The Ecstasy Club*, who move into a squat precisely in order to escape the forces of

parental, cultural and institutional authority, very quickly arrange themselves into a group of subservient cult members, dependent on their leader, Duncan, for inspiration and legitimization: 'As Duncan went through the list, everyone he mentioned smiled. Their experiences were real because Duncan acknowledged them as such' (184). Obviously the opportunities for advancement through liberation from traditional structures prophesized by Rushkoff in his theoretical *Children of Chaos* are irrelevant as far as his fictional characters are concerned, for they continue to cling stubbornly to the security – and repression – offered by an authoritative leader. A similar reluctance – or perhaps even inability – to completely reject the idea of an omniscient God will be discussed in relation to Coupland's novels in the next section of this chapter.

Initially it appears as though Coupland's fictional world is indeed wholly secular. *Life After God* is ostensibly based in a world in which God is no longer present even as a narrative: 'You are the first generation raised without religion' (161); while the afterlife presented in *Girlfriend in a Coma* owes nothing to traditional religious ideals. The apparent absence of a God is compounded by the fact that the characters search desperately for substitutes with which to fill the void left in His wake. The characters of *Generation X* structure their lives around a 'Personal Tabu', which is: 'A small rule for living, bordering on a superstition, that allows one to cope with everyday life in the absence of cultural or religious dictums' (74); while John Johnson, in *Miss Wyoming* similarly immerses himself in a grueling schedule: 'He one day realized he was taking a measure of comfort in following a rigid schedule. He quickly developed a notion that he might just be able to squeak through if he kept his days fastidiously identical' (213). Elsewhere, Tyler Johnson takes refuge in his shampoo collection: 'Hair is important' (*Shampoo Planet*, 7); the narrator of *Life After God* transfers his allegiance to Superman: 'I have always liked the idea that there is one person in the world who doesn't do bad things' (85); the *Microserfs* invest their computers with a sense of transcendence: 'Do we pray *to* machines or *through* them?' (183) and regard Bill Gates as their spiritual leader: 'Maybe this whole Bill thing is actually the subconscious manufacture of God' (16); while the protagonists of *Girlfriend in a Coma* fill their lives with drink, drugs and memories of the comatose Karen: 'Richard drank and placed all

his hope in *me*....I wasn't supposed to ever wake up. Richard could have spent his life mooning away about me and never have to deal with real life' (215). These examples appear to confirm Baudrillard's theory that belief in God now precludes His existence, for the faith invested by Coupland's characters in these various things appears to stem from a determined refusal to acknowledge that there might be nothing underpinning their lives.

What is astonishing about Coupland's characters is that in spite of their sometimes parrot-like reiteration of Baudrillard's theories – Susan, for example, echoes his ideas about the simulacrum when she declares that all television images are 'random': 'There's no subconscious underneath to generate the images' (*Microserfs*, 44) – many of them retain an intrinsic belief in a universal, underlying order. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, for example, Richard confesses: 'I still lived, as did Hamilton, with the belief that meaning could pop into my life at any moment' (76); while Linus explains that it is not a return to the old age of repressive religious structure he desires, but merely a *clue* that some form of external legitimization does exist (236). Even the depressed narrator of *Life After God* admits that: 'In spite of everything that has happened in my life, I have never lost the sensation of always being on the brink of some magic revelation – that *if only* I would look closely enough at the world, then that magic revelation would be mine' (73-4). In fact, in spite of all Baudrillard or Rushkoff might claim about technology liberating us from, and even taking the place of, religious belief, Coupland seems to argue the opposite: that in a society in which traditional institutions have been dismantled, and time and distance have been imploded by electronic advancements, we need, more than ever before, to believe that life has an intrinsic meaning and structure: 'My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love' (*Life After God*, 359). The sentiments expressed by its narrator thus belie the title of this particular novel.

As well as these verbal assertions that God is still very much a part of contemporary life, Coupland borrows extensively from religious imagery throughout his

novels. The apocalypse, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, is a theme central to both *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*. It also features at the end of *Generation X*, in the form of what the narrator initially believes is a thermonuclear cloud. His relief when it transpires that the cloud is nothing more sinister than the result of some controlled land clearing: ‘Farmers within a small area were burning off the stubble of their fields’ (176) is heightened by two blatantly redemptive images, symbolic perhaps of the fact that he has been given a second chance. The first of these is of a ‘cocaine white egret’ who has approached the burning field in anticipation of the wildlife that will be forced to flee from the flames and thrills onlookers with its presence: ‘We quickly and excitedly realized that it was going to swoop right over *us*. We felt chosen’ (178). The fact that the bird actually collides with Andy, slightly injuring him: ‘The egret had grazed my head – its claw had ripped my scalp’ is perhaps suggestive of a stigmata, which is traditionally the sign that one has been selected to guide one’s people into the future. The second of the redemptive images comes in the form of a group of handicapped children who envelop Andy shortly after his encounter with the egret. The pleasure he derives from his immersion into this group: ‘Suddenly I was dog-piled by an instant family, in their adoring, healing, uncritical embrace’ (179), clearly testifies to Coupland’s belief in the importance of other traditional structuring narratives, such as the community or the family, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

One final biblical motif that recurs throughout Coupland’s fiction is the idea of baptism, which traditionally symbolizes the beginning of a new, more fulfilling life. The world-weary narrator of *Life After God* immerses himself in a mountain spring as a sign that he is prepared to return from his exile in Canada in order to rebuild his life. The redemptive terms in which this event is described: ‘And the water from the stream above me roars. Oh, does it roar! Like a voice that knows only one message, one truth – never-ending’ (357) suggests that the future is indeed looking bright. A similar scenario unfolds in *Miss Wyoming*, in which Susan marks the beginning of a more authentic life, away from the constant attention of the media, with a swim: ‘She then stripped off all her clothes and Karen Galvin’s wig – wigs usually made her scalp itchy and sweaty in any role she played – and she gently walked into the Maumee River, her toes touching

mud and rock' (77-8). Her reemergence as a stronger character, who is in sole control of her life, indicates that she too was successfully reborn. After his first meeting with Susan, John's sense that he is about to embark on a new, more fulfilling phase of his life, is also marked in this manner: 'John stood, clutching the silk to his heart while the sprinkler drenched his feet, as though they were seeds' (13). The most dramatic manifestation of the baptism motif comes at the end of *Shampoo Planet*, in which the floor of the apartment above Tyler collapses, covering him in water and a number of the pets kept by the man who lived upstairs: 'The floor above Anna-Louise and me has collapsed from the weight of the carp pond's water and has fallen into the bedroom below – become a gangplank for the many animals of Mr. Lancaster's menagerie' (299). Tyler's joyous remark that: '*The world is alive*' can be interpreted in two ways. Evans insists that Coupland is parodying the Garden of Eden myth in order to underline the lack of redemption available in the contemporary world²⁴. Given that Tyler has recently returned from a life of drifting in California in order to take up employment with a major company, has saved his mother from a brutal attack by her ex-husband and is in the process of rebuilding his relationship with his ex-girlfriend, however, it does appear as though his life is returning to an even keel. His immersion in water could thus be interpreted as evidence that he too has been reborn. Overall, the examples discussed above suggest that in spite of Coupland's own secular upbringing: 'I was raised in a totally secular environment'²⁵, he is unwilling to give up his faith in the existence of an omniscient deity who underpins life and gives it meaning.

Of course the number of characters lucky enough to receive first-hand confirmation that their lives are thus validated is small. For the remainder, other structures or narratives must be sought. The problem, as Coupland points out in *Polaroids From The Dead*, is that until fairly recently no matter where one was born on earth, one's culture provided one with: 'All components essential for the forging of identity' – components which included religion, family, ideology and a general sense of

²⁴ "Review of *Shampoo Planet*". <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

²⁵ Quoted in Alexander Laurence. "Interview With Douglas Coupland". <http://imv.au.dk/~bogus/frames.html>

living 'within a historic continuum' (180). Within the last decade, however, the deluge of new media and electronic information has obliterated the 'stencils within which we trace our lives', with the result that people - in particular those living on the West Coast of America - suddenly find themselves 'denarrated', or alive without any of the guiding frameworks to help them (182). In the remaining 'vacuum of nothingness', the individual is forced either to daily 'reinvent' him/herself, or perish like Marilyn Monroe who eventually found it too difficult to repeatedly: 'Put a pleasant facade onto - nothingness' (184). The next section of this chapter will examine a number of the strategies adopted by Coupland's characters, as they struggle to connect themselves to a meaningful and life-affirming structure.

Perhaps the easiest option, as I have already discussed in relation to many of the characters who inhabit the novels of Pynchon, DeLillo and Ellis, is denial - a retreat into drugs, drink or overwork as a way of avoiding 'reality'. This is the option chosen by all of the protagonists of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, as the newly awake Karen is quick to notice: 'Pam and Ham did smack....Wendy lost herself in grueling routine. Linus apparently went away for years trying to figure out the meaning of life....Richard drank' (215). It is also espoused by the narrator of *Life After God* who insists that his course of anti-depressants have had a beneficial effect on his personality: 'My work became more efficient, and so overall I became a more productive member of society. It was, I suppose, like cosmetic surgery of the brain' (276); and by Ethan, the most disaffected of the *Microserfs*, who claims that: 'Drinking allows me to take an identity holiday' (235). Of course, as evidence in previous chapters showed, this stifling of one's personality is unlikely to result in any long-term happiness. Karen is highly critical of the way in which her friends have chosen to develop in her absence: 'She had expected people to be grown up at the age of thirty-four. Instead, they seem at best insular and without a central core, which might give purpose to their lives' (155); the narrator of *Life After God* only realizes how much of the world's beauty had passed him by when he stops taking his anti-depressants: 'Suddenly I realized....that I was actually *feeling*. My old personality was, after months of pills and pleasant nothingness, returning....I felt a lump in my throat, and I spent the rest of the day walking around

this strange and beautiful city' (326); while even Ethan admits to occasionally feeling: 'Nostalgic for my old personality' (235). Clearly this obliteration of personality by drink, drugs and overwork is not a course Coupland encourages his characters to follow.

A similar, although possibly less destructive, strategy adopted by some of the characters is their all-consuming involvement with the dominant forces in the surrounding environment. This belief that a close association with contemporary technological advances is one way of surviving in today's world is illustrated in *Microserfs*, in which the narrator's father turns to computing after losing his job: 'Dad signed up for a night course in C++. He's going to make himself relevant' (194). This belief that technology can validate one's existence results in a situation where: 'Todd...like many 1990's people, equates his self-worth with the number of messages on his phone answering machine. If the red light's not blinking...YOU ARE A LOSER' (321). Another option is, of course, to look to consumerism and the mass media for guidance. So popular is this strategy with a number of Coupland's characters that he coins a new name for them: 'The McDead' – people whose: 'Ideas and objects and activities (are) made of fake materials ground up and reshaped into precisely measurable units entered into some rich guy's software spreadsheet program' (*Polaroids from the Dead*, 23). Of course, the problem with all of these strategies is that they eventually become the end rather than the means of identity. In other words, although Coupland's characters intend to use aspects of the surrounding culture in order to formulate and express their individuality, they are in danger of becoming nothing more than glorified advertizements for their favoured brand names or software packages. An over-dependence on popular culture leads thus not to the enhancement, but rather to the obliteration, of their own personalities.

In the light of this failure to locate the self through the use of tribal badges of identity, such as shampoo brands, the protagonists of *Generation X* decide that their only option is to withdraw from mainstream society to the Californian desert where they hope to discover their true essence. Given that they have lost faith in traditional metanarratives, but still believe that: 'It's not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments', they resolve to literally 'tell' themselves into existence

through a series of storytelling sessions, for as Claire remarks: 'Either our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them' (8). Their goal, therefore, is quite simply to: 'Tell stories and to make our lives worthwhile tales in the process' (8). I have already discussed this use of narrative as a means of structuring life in relation to characters such as Pynchon's Oedipa Maas, DeLillo's Oswald and Ellis' Victor Johnson. What inevitably happens to these characters is that the narratives they are pursuing eventually swamp them, with the result that their identities are smothered rather than asserted. Coupland's characters, however, as I have pointed out before, are more resilient and benefit considerably from the stories they tell, without becoming subsumed by them. There are two main strategies they use in order to accomplish this. Firstly, they adhere to Brecht's 'alienation effect' theory, which demands that the audience be kept aware of the artificiality of the theatre at all times. Rushkoff cites the ironic and cynical distance promoted by television programs like *The Simpsons*, in which Bart: 'Seems aware of his own role within the show and often comments on what his family must look like to the audience watching along', as an example of how the modern audience is encouraged to view the action not as an end in itself, but as fodder for future discussion and conversation between themselves (*Children of Chaos*, 225). By creating fictive settings for their own stories, like the mythic world of 'Texlahoma', Andy, Dag and Claire thus enable themselves to preserve a certain distance from the real feelings and experiences they describe, and to comment upon them afterwards without the risk of embarrassing or offending each other.

The other strategy adopted by the characters can be related to Mandelbrot's theory of fractals, which proposes that any individual component represents a microcosm of the whole²⁶. In other words, instead of losing themselves in their stories, the protagonists of *Generation X* use them to explore different facets of their personalities. In these terms, Andy's story about Edward, the young man who had such faith in his own self-sufficiency that he locks himself away from the world in a room filled with books for ten years, only to find himself an outcast in the new world which

²⁶ See Rushkoff. *Children of Chaos*, 22.

has been built 'not of words but of relationships' (50), could be interpreted as an indication both of Andy's own fear of finding himself alone and friendless, and his gratitude that he has escaped this fate through his friendship with Dag and Claire: 'These creatures here in this room with me – these are the creatures I love and who love me....If I could have it thus, I would like this moment to continue forever' (130). It is thus clear that narration and storytelling is not being used by these characters as an antidote or as an escape mechanism from reality, but rather as an exercise that both heightens and unifies their sense of self. By being true to themselves and becoming conversant with every aspect of their identities, it would appear that in spite of the abolition of traditional means of character formation, such as a knowledge of one's history, Coupland's characters may indeed survive and even prosper in the contemporary world.

In many ways, as I have illustrated throughout this chapter, Coupland's novels could be regarded as the fictional reworking of much of contemporary theory, for it abounds in references to consumerism, the mass media and other technological advances that have had such huge effects on the formation of modern society: influencing fashion, work and opinions, dismantling many traditional metanarratives, and forcing a drastic change in the formation and expression of one's own identity. What becomes apparent when his novels are examined in the light of the more radical of these theories, however, is his reluctance or even inability to buy in completely to the weightlessness and lack of referentiality of the new world as depicted, for example, by Baudrillard. Towards the end of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Linus describes his own attempts to reach a state of epiphany and transcendence, attempts which fail because of his inability to 'surrender' himself sufficiently: 'I still wanted to keep a foot in both worlds' (235). This statement could be applied to Coupland's characters as a whole, for in spite of their alleged desire to free themselves from all vestiges of tradition and structure, each and every one of them eventually immerses him/herself in the bosom of the most ancient institution of all – the family. The importance of the family for Coupland's characters is repeatedly emphasized throughout his novels, where it is generally regarded as a haven of personal values and as an opportunity for the reaffirmation of the

blood connections so vital for the retention of a sense of self in an increasingly anarchic post-industrial society. In the concluding section of this chapter, I will examine the role played by the family in Coupland's fiction, before looking briefly at his own ancestry and heritage.

Family is a term used relatively loosely by Coupland, for in the postmodern world it does not necessarily refer to the traditional unit of parents and their children, but can also mean a group of tightly-woven and interdependent friends, although in his novels the two are often intermingled. In *Generation X*, for example, it is with his friends, rather than his own biological family, that Andy feels most safe and loved: 'These creatures here in this room with me – these are the creatures I love and who love me....I feel so happy I could die' (130). *Shampoo Planet* brings the focus once more onto the biological family. Its narrative is actually framed by two crucial references to the father, beginning with Jasmine's abandonment by her abusive ex-husband: 'Well, I think to myself, *fatherless again*' (4), and ending when she is dramatically rescued by Tyler from yet another assault: 'You said you needed my help, Mom....I'm your immune system, Mom' (291), an action that solidifies their sense of dependence and togetherness. The fact that the novel ends with Tyler's reconciliation with his ex-girlfriend heightens this sense that salvation resides in a close family grouping. Similarly, the events and stories in *Life After God* are recounted as the narrator drives with his young daughter back to his familial home in Canada, in order to heal himself after the trauma of his separation from his wife; while *Miss Wyoming* ends happily when Susan is not only reconciled with her long-estranged mother, but is about to embark on a potentially very fulfilling relationship with John. Perhaps most interesting are the occasions on which both real and surrogate families are merged, as happens in both *Microserfs* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*. In the former, Daniel and his friends/co-workers move en masse into his parents' home, while attempting to set up their own software company: 'For financial reasons, we have to work at Mom and Dad's place, until we're flush with VC capital' (117). Daniel even manages to merge family with technology, using as a password for his computer the phrase 'Hello Jed', a greeting to his dead brother whose spectral presence hovers over the novel as a whole: 'I still miss

Jeddie. I can't get him out of my mind' (41). Even more bizarre is the situation at the end of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, where the characters have not only all moved back into the neighbourhood in which they grew up: 'Richard, looking at all their lives from a distance, sees the recurring pattern here....a pattern in which the five of his friends seem destined always to return to their quiet little neighbourhood' (141-2) – indeed into the same house when the rest of the world has fallen asleep! – but have also paired off into three sets of couples. Their fantasy, their idea of heaven, is one shared by all of Coupland's characters: 'Just imagine....a world without loneliness. Every trial would become bearable, wouldn't it?' (222). This statement epitomizes what I believe is one of the central themes of all of Coupland's novels: that as long as the characters can draw upon the support and encouragement of their friends and family, they will succeed in navigating their way through the confusion and turbulence of contemporary life. The frequency with which these sentiments are repeated throughout the novels testifies to the faith Coupland has retained in the family as a source of strength and regeneration in the postmodern world.

This idea that the family continues to function as a potential source of salvation for the characters is one that has been discussed, in earlier chapters, in relation to the novels of Pynchon and DeLillo. Atwood insists, however, that it is more commonly a trait of Canadian literature, for whereas in American literature the family is always something the hero must repudiate and leave in order to define 'his own freedom, his own Frontier', his Canadian counterpart finds himself unable to break free because of a strong sense of group-, as opposed to self-preservation: 'Families in Canadian fiction huddle together....miserable and crowded, but unwilling to leave because the alternative is seen as cold, empty space' (*Survival*, 131-2). I will finish the chapter by briefly discussing the implications Coupland's nationality has for his fiction and for his status as a commentator on contemporary American society.

The first point I would like to make is that although Coupland is himself Canadian, his intrinsic knowledge about and appreciation for contemporary American culture makes his inclusion in this thesis valid. His novels, with one exception, are all set on the American West Coast and his characters clearly products of this media-

dominated environment. Even the exception, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, is located in a city characterized by its lack of individuality, a trait that makes it a popular choice for low-budget television series and movies: ‘They film everything here because Vancouver’s unique: You can morph it into any North American city or green space with little effort and even less expense.... See that motel over there? That was “Pittsburgh” in *Movie of the Week*’ (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 87). Indeed, there is a certain amount of support for the theory that, as a Canadian, Coupland is in the ideal position to comment upon contemporary American culture for, on the one hand, he is exposed to the same volume of media as his American counterparts²⁷; while on the other, as fellow-Canadian McLuhan points out, his distance allows him to preserve a degree of objectivity: ‘Sharing the American way without commitment to American goals or responsibilities, makes the Canadian intellectually detached and observant as an interpreter of American destiny’²⁸. What makes Canadian discourse on technology particularly significant and privileged, according to Kroker, is that while fully implicated in the ‘spearhead of modernity’ of the US, it also makes room for the opposing reflection on the price being paid for the comforts of technological society²⁹. This breadth of perspective certainly explains the high regard in which many Canadian theorists, such as McLuhan and Innis, are held. It is also perhaps the reason why Coupland’s characters manage to interact with their surrounding environment without losing themselves in the process, as was the case with characters in the novels of Pynchon, DeLillo and Ellis.

By far the most important role played by Canada in Coupland’s fiction is as a place of refuge for characters at times of great emotion. Tyler Johnson retreats to Canada in an attempt to distance himself from a particularly traumatic period in his life, during which he broke up with his long-term girlfriend and witnessed the return of his mother’s abusive ex-husband: ‘My past lies behind me like a bonfire of anchors and I

²⁷ Since 1974, Canada has been the number one market for American movies. See Manjunath Pendakur, *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of The Canadian Film Industry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 30.

²⁸ Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 150.

²⁹ Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis McLuhan Grant* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984), 13.

am freed from the trappings of identity' (*Shampoo Planet*, 187). The narrator of *Life After God* similarly brings his young daughter up to Prince George after the break-up of their family and the 'patch of deep brooding' that followed (29). Canada also represents a place of hope for many characters. Michael, leader of *Microserfs'* computer nerds, finds true love (via the Internet) in Ontario: 'I'm in love with...it. The BarCode entity lives in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada' (323); while the Vancouver-resident protagonists of *Girlfriend in a Coma* are the last remaining inhabitants on earth and are, moreover, charged with leading humankind towards a better future. Although these examples could be dismissed as evidence of a cultural bias, I believe that the value of Canada for Coupland lies in its representation of an escape valve. To return to one of Pynchon's favourite analogies, if American society, flooded as it is with the signs and images of consumerism and the mass media, has come to resemble a closed system becoming progressively more entropic, then Canada, a country characterized primarily by its vast areas of untamed land, represents a way in which this closed system can be reopened and regenerated. It is no coincidence that Coupland's characters generally return from their excursions to Canada feeling happier and more confident about themselves: 'As long as there is wilderness, I know there is a larger part of myself that I can always visit, vast tracts of territory lying dormant, craving exploration and providing sanctity' (*Life After God*, 344). As this last statement illustrates, Canada, for Coupland, symbolizes not only a physical refuge from the pressures of contemporary life, but also a place relatively immune to the forces of consumerism and the mass media, where the psyche can thus heal and reintegrate itself, before returning to society to reassume its fight against entropy. This facility is perhaps the main reason Coupland's characters display an optimism and a determination to survive that surpasses all other characters discussed in the course of this thesis, in particular their contemporaries in the novels of Bret Easton Ellis.

Conclusion:

‘One of my own stray childhood fears had been to wonder what a whale might feel like had it been born and bred in captivity, then released into the wild – into its ancestral sea – its limited world instantly blowing up when cast into the unknowable depths’ –
Girlfriend in a Coma.

The reason the plight of a newly released whale makes such an impression on Richard, narrator of Coupland’s *Girlfriend in a Coma*, is that it corresponds to his own fear: ‘Of a world that would expand suddenly, violently, and without rules or laws: bubbles, seaweed and storms and frightening volumes of dark blue that never end’ (107). What this describes is, of course, the transition to adulthood, where the individual is expected to make his/her way through life without the constant direction and validation of the family. Metaphorically, this passage also refers to the journey undertaken by many of the protagonists discussed during this thesis, who were the first to venture forth from the linear and hierarchically-structured world of their ancestors into the previously uncharted realm of the postmodern, where recent innovations in consumerism and the mass media have undermined the previously unquestioned concepts of history, time and a belief that life is validated by a series of ‘grand narratives’, like the presence of an omniscient God.

The general consensus among the authors I have examined is that their characters *can* survive and adapt to the rapid changes occurring around them, as long as they draw upon the strength and support of their friends and family, and on their own intrinsic ability to assume responsibility for the narration of their lives in the absence of traditional epistemological and ontological certainties. Indeed in their most recent publications, all four actively help their protagonists to achieve this goal. In *Vineland*, *Mason and Dixon*, and *Underworld*, Pynchon and DeLillo journey into the past in order to discover how the values and traditions of a simpler era might be recovered; in *Glamorama*, Ellis appears to release Victor Johnson from the numbing cycle of drugs and media saturation that destroys his students and makes a psychopath out of Patrick Bateman; while Coupland not only gives the protagonists of *Girlfriend in a Coma* a

second chance to save themselves and their world from extinction, but begins the millennium with the optimistic and life-affirming *Miss Wyoming*, which celebrates the all-conquering power of love.

One of the prerequisites for adulthood, as Coupland points out, is the willingness to take responsibility for one's own actions, without expecting the constant validation needed by a child: 'So much of being adult is reconciling ourselves with the awkwardness and strangeness of our own feelings. Youth is the time of life lived for some imaginary audience' (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 48). The problem is that none of the authors appear willing, or able, to make this break. As I pointed out above, Pynchon and DeLillo retreat into their memories of and nostalgia for a simpler past; Ellis locates Victor Johnson's salvation among the mediated words of a billboard; while Coupland gathers his characters together in claustrophobic groups. In spite of their wealth of knowledge about the forces shaping contemporary American society, therefore, it would appear that these authors are ultimately as nervous and unsure about venturing into the future as the narrator of *Girlfriend in a Coma*. The widespread apathy, which many critics regard as the dominant mood in contemporary America, is clearly thus a symptom of this fear of the unknown – a fear fostered by the dramatic changes that have occurred over the last few decades of the twentieth century.

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